Preface

In the well-loved poem by Robert Frost entitled, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," he pens, **"The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep."** One interpretation of these lines is: "We should not get tempted to any enjoyable things we see around us. We should not rest until our work is completed. "

"Called to Serve" Larsen Legacy Volume 11: 2011-2013 records the preparations, departure, and serving of my mission to Washington D.C. North. It was a time of keeping promises that Daddy and I made years before, that when SaraKay served her full-time mission, we would also serve. When Daddy died, those promises animated my desires and so I moved ahead, with both trepidation and determination to put my personal agenda aside and enlist in "the cause".

And so, with my family's approval and encouragement, I left behind other attachments for a season of consecration. With reliance on the Lord as well as frequent "touches" with family, I was enlivened and sustained. And although these letters can in no way capture my entire experience, they recount many of the highlights of my time wearing the famous black badge.

Dedication

Dedicated to you children and grandchildren who provided unfailing love, support, and advice to a fledgling missionary who endured the bumps and bruises of the "Work" as well as the transcendent joys, knowing that back home there was a family praying for my protection and success.

Acknowledgements

To SaraKay for proof-reading, Steve for computer help, and John for his unfailing willingness to format yet another volume. All three made this book possible not only with their hours of work and help but with their enduring commitment to this project's ultimate conclusion. Thank you!

The Larsen Legacy

Volume 11: 2011-2013

Called to Serve

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2011

January 11, 2011

SaraKay is hosting a party tonight and I'm hiding out in the computer room catching up on my email and going through the piles on my desk. It is good to be home although we had a wonderful trip and thoroughly enjoyed the chance to see so many of you over the holidays. On Friday Becky and family arrived from Chandler and the fun began. SaraKay arrived home from college a few hours later with her car piled high with all her paraphernalia and clothes. Earlier that day she performed at the new I-Center dedication. It was an emotional and spiritual experience. After taking her last final she finished up her cleaning detail and headed for home. She met with a more-than-warm welcome from Becky and kids as well as me.

Becky brought winter duds for the kids and they lost no time in getting out into the snow and jumping on the trampoline. Although much of the snow had melted off, there was still enough for the kids to enjoy and another storm moved in Friday night. We spent some time decorating cookies on Saturday and even had a short recital with each of the kids performing on the piano. SaraKay sang some opera for the kids and before she was finished Larsen and Cole were holding back the laughter. Larsen said, "That doesn't sound like SaraKay!" We all had a good laugh over it since opera truly is different from the music most people enjoy. Later that night we attended a performance of the Nutcracker Ballet. I remember when Grandma Barbara took us all to a performance in Salt Lake and so when I saw that it was being performed here, I just couldn't resist taking Becky and the kids. I was pleased that they all seemed to enjoy it although it did get a little long.

Sunday morning Becky drove to Burley to spend the day with Mike and Marci and SaraKay and I took care of our obligations here. Our ward choir performed several numbers and it was fun to have SaraKay join us and add some strength to the soprano section. I taught my Sunbeams for the last time and then hurried home to finish packing for our trip. SaraKay attended her singles branch and when she arrived home, we finished packing suitcases, sorted out gifts and pecan logs for Burley and Boise, loaded the cooler and tried to account for all the last-minute details of being gone for two weeks. Fortunately, the weather was clear and we were able to make the trip to Burley easily.

The Burley bunch were enjoying their Arizona cousins and we had another evening of fun as we visited and exchanged Christmas gifts and greetings. Mike and Marci treated us to hot scones and other goodies and the kids disappeared into the basement to play ping pong and give us a little more visiting time.

Monday morning Becky and kids caravanned with us to Boise and I ended up with Tate and Maddie as passengers. We had a great time! They teased me and I teased them and the time just sped by. Soon we were at David and Andrea's and we joined the excitement of their household. There were delicious hot rolls (Jenny's recipe) just coming out of the oven and preparations were being made for the recital at the rest home that evening. Andrea, Laurel, and Anna all give lessons in flute, piano, and dancing and so each Christmas they hold a recital and do it at a local rest home for the residents. What fun to join with their family on that occasion!

Monday afternoon David took all the kids outside and they built snowmen and snow caves. Before they were through, they had a whole family of cleverly decorated snowmen in their back yard. Becky and kids left later to join Tim for supper and we finished getting things ready for an early morning on Tuesday. David drove us to the airport at six Tuesday and picked up Tim enroute. He was so gracious to help so that we didn't have to pay for parking at the airport while we were in China.

Our flight was long but it was so fun sharing the experience with Tim and SaraKay. John was waiting at the airport with James when we arrived. He was standing in a group of Asians as we came through the baggage area and was nearly a head taller and easily visible. The rest of the family was still up and waiting for our arrival and their household was full of excitement! Tim commented that it was fun to be in a family setting for Christmas and feel all the energy.

John and Laurel's home is lovely. It is roomy, attractively decorated, and nestled in a quiet neighborhood. They have a driver and seven-passenger van that we were able to use for all our comings and goings and it was so convenient in the midst of that very big and busy city with its horrendous traffic. Laurel and John had

planned out each day so that we saw some wonderful places, did some shopping, ate Chinese food, and got a feel for the people.

Our first day there we toured the Yu Garden and a Buddhist temple. The garden was full of visitors, mostly Asian, and it became obvious that we were somewhat of a novelty as other visitors crowded around our group and even requested having their pictures taken with us. Another thing we were to encounter throughout our trip was the constant presence of small business owners hawking their wares. They were very vocal and persistent. We spent time in a large market full of open stalls with displays of everything imaginable including shops where you could purchase tailor-made coats and suits. It was fun to watch John and Laurel dicker with the shop keepers over the price of the merchandise. Everything was negotiable and Laurel had it down to an art form.

Another constant in our sight-seeing was the presence of beggars in the streets. It was heart-wrenching to see them wrapped up against the cold and working the crowds of people. It reminded me of Grandma Ilene's experiences while she lived in Pakistan and dealt with the poverty she saw each day on the streets of Peshawar.

On Friday we visited FuXing Park. It was bitter cold but the park was full of people (mostly retirement age) involved in a variety of activities. Our guide, Lisa, commented that most households in China include three generations. The grandparents, who are retired and have a small government pension, care for their grandchild while both parents work out of the home to provide. Because the homes are very small the grandparents often frequent the park where they can find friends and give the rest of the family a little breathing space when they are not at work. The activities included community dancing, kite flying, badminton, men working yoyos, a choir practicing to live music, and several groups of men and women doing graceful, disciplined and slow Tai Chi movements to music. There was also an area where people congregated and discussed political matters. Despite the early hour and cold there were people everywhere. We stopped for a while and listened to the choir and when they completed their number, we clapped for them. Immediately the instrumentalist accompanying the choir started playing "Jingle Bells" and we joined in the singing. It was a sweet interaction and we appreciated their kindness to us visiting Americans.

Much of what we saw in both the people and the sites we visited was the Asian people's emphasis on harmony, beauty, peace, longevity, and resilience. Our guide mentioned the various symbols that represented these attributes and I was struck by the way the Chinese people have continued to value these virtues despite the oppression and challenges they have faced throughout their country's history. Another recurring theme was that of enduring and persevering and finding a way to overcome the obstacles that life brings our way. I really came to admire their culture of hard work, frugality, and courage that I saw throughout the trip.

You have probably heard the adage that was prevalent during the Great Depression: “Fix it up, wear it out; make do or do without." I remember my mother telling me that the first time she met John C. Richards, who would become her father-in-law, she laughed right out loud because he was using a rope to keep his pants up. It was tied to a belt loop on the front of his pants and crossed over his shoulder and tied to another belt loop in the back since he didn't have the money for a belt. Mother said that Grandpa laughed along with her so I guess he wasn't offended, but was just "making do." I remember as a child the things our family did to "make do" when we didn't have the money to buy what was needed. Well, the Chinese are masters of "making do" and I saw so many instances of their patching things together to extend the life of a bike, or coat, or other necessities. It would have been humorous to see if I hadn't realized that it was because of their poverty. Grinding poverty truly is grinding.

Another thing we did was to visit a wet market which was a large open warehouse where all manner of animals were killed and prepared for selling. We saw chickens, pigs, eels, squid, and fish being prepared, mostly by women who were bundled up against the cold, and who wielded huge meat cleavers and worked with the strength of men. We also saw other women working with small knives and filleting eels no larger than a thick strand of yarn. It was a smelly, noisy, and messy place. I was saddened by the poor working conditions and the work required of the women.

Lisa took us to visit a typical Chinese family in an old neighborhood. We walked down a small alley onto which opened various apartments. At each door was a large cement sink and tap for the

family's use. Inside it was dark and crowded. The biggest room was the kitchen which was used by several families and then we went up a steep flight of old wooden stairs to the family's living area which consisted of a small bedroom and a patio. The room had several beds, a dresser, a TV, a small table, and a window that opened onto the street. This particular family had three children who were all grown and gone. The lady of the house was very kind and gracious to us and the house was clean and orderly despite the lack of modern appliances or bathroom facilities. We sat on the beds and visited with our hostess. It was fun to have John do much of the translating for us and before we left, we sang "Silent Night" for her. Lisa told us that this family had lived in this apartment all their lives as had their parents before them. It was so sad to see how devoid of modern conveniences the apartment was. I suspect that this sweet lady will live her whole life without having most of the luxuries that we take for granted including central heating and indoor plumbing.

We also visited a small, quaint restaurant run by a local artist who was a friend of our guide. Following our meal, which we ate with chopsticks, we took a private tour with the artist and viewed his paintings and his personal art techniques. Many of his creations were huge pictures made up of small pieces of silk fabric, rolled into tiny tight tubes and glued to a canvas to create a design. It's hard to describe but the effect was beautiful and each large finished work cost several thousand dollars.

After the day of touring, we were all tired and had an early bedtime on Christmas Eve. We had a short family home evening with the children portraying the Christmas Nativity and we sang some songs with Eliza and Emma at the piano. The kids were so excited that they could hardly contain themselves and it was nice when the house finally quieted down and Santa made his visit.

Christmas morning dawned early as the sounds of the kids on the stairs awoke us all. Santa left plenty of gifts and the next hour was filled with delightful squeals as the gifts were unwrapped and treasures discovered. John and Laurel included SaraKay, Tim and me in their Christmas giving and gave us each several gifts to remember our Christmas in China of 2010. What fun to be a part of that occasion with them! They also provided a delicious Christmas feast including a ham that had been cooked and catered at a local hotel since ham is such a difficult meat to buy in Asia. Laurel had gone to a lot of work baking Christmas sugar cookies and pecan bars and had lots of ice cream on hand so that we had a truly American Christmas dinner.

Later that afternoon Laurel convinced us that we couldn't leave China without getting a foot massage and so we broke away from home for a while to visit a local massage parlor. It was so relaxing and fun to be sharing the experience with John, Laurel, Tim and SaraKay. Later that afternoon we attended the Shanghai circus. What an amazing evening! We saw some truly stunning feats of strength and agility as well as enjoyed the traditional Chinese music provided by a live band. Aside from the entertainment it was interesting to be in that large crowd of people of many different nationalities and observe the interaction and responses. What fun!

Sunday dawned early as we left at 8:15 to attend John and Laurel's international branch which was held in a business office building in Shanghai. It was wonderful to see the love and fellowshipping among the branch members and they treated us with that same warmth. The block of meetings was well attended and the lessons well presented. It never ceases to amaze me that a person can attend an LDS service anywhere in the world and feel the Spirit and have the continuity provided by the Church correlation and curriculum departments. I was so grateful to be able to participate in the meetings with John and Laurel's family and to sense the love and care that are a part of their Church involvement in Shanghai.

On Monday we toured a water town called JuJiaJiao. It was an old traditional village that had canals for streets, similar to the ones in Venice, Italy. The bridges and canal walls and walkways looked like they were constructed thousands of years ago and could still last another 1,000 years. So much of what we saw was made of cut and laid stones and was timeless. We did more shopping and then took a ride in a covered boat steered by a man on the back who used a long pole. It looked so much like the ones that I've seen in movies that I felt like we were in some kind of ride at Disneyland.

That afternoon after returning home we gathered up our belongings and left for the airport and Beijing. Just before leaving Shanghai, we made a trip to the schools that the children attend. Although the schools were closed, we

were able to go inside the large campus and look through the windows and see the setup and facilities. We then walked across the street to where Tessa attends preschool and enjoyed the chance to see a very wealthy neighborhood and Tessa's preschool situation. The guards at the entrance recognized Laurel and Tessa and had big smiles for all of us.

Enroute to the airport we ran into some terrible traffic and we came very near missing our flight. We were all relieved when we finally got to the boarding gate as the last of the passengers were loading onto a shuttle that took us to the airplane. I don't know how we would have managed without John and his expertise with the language. He was amazing! Everywhere we went he paved the way and secured what we needed. It was fun to watch the Chinese clerks when John addressed them in Chinese and to see the surprise and respect in their faces.

We spent Tuesday touring in Beijing with a driver and guide who John arranged for in advance. Some of the places we visited included Tiainen Square, the Forbidden City, Jing Shan Park, Summer Palace, "Birds Nest" Olympic stadium, the night market, and the Beijing Opera. It was fascinating to visit all the emperor's palaces, temples, and summer palace. To say they were elaborate is an understatement. I kept thinking about the counsel in the Book of Mormon against the people having kings and how an unrighteous king would cause much iniquity and misery among the people he governed. What a confirmation of that we witnessed as we saw the lavish way the emperor and his family lived at the expense of the people. Another interesting fact was the oppression of the women in the royal household. The bride of the emperor only crossed the palace threshold once, on the day of her marriage, and then she was never permitted to ever be in public or out of the palace again. The only males inside the palace were the emperor, small boy children, and the thousands of eunuchs who served the royal family. Each emperor had hundreds of concubines and they lived out their lives inside the Forbidden City, never being permitted to see their families again. It put me in mind of the story of Esther and her life as a part of the royal family.

It was believed that the Chinese emperor was part deity and most of the dynasties lasted for several hundred years until the peasantry rose up in rebellion and joined with the military leaders to usurp the royal family's power. There were lots of stories of court intrigue and again it reminded me of the Jaredite account in the Book of Mormon and their ruling families and the murder and intrigue that were part and parcel of being ruled by a king. It was awe-inspiring to realize that the Chinese nation has existed probably since the flood and has never been entirely wiped out like so many of the other famous civilizations throughout history.

Probably my least favorite event of the trip was attending the Beijing Opera. I have always wanted to attend an opera and SaraKay and I were so excited about it but it wasn't what we had expected. The way the opera star sings is so different from anything I have ever heard before and it wasn't at all a pleasant sound. Before the performers came on stage, the tinniest sounding music began and I leaned over to SaraKay and whispered that it sounded like the opera company had saved money by using the kitchen help for the music instead of a regular band. We had a good laugh about it since it really did sound like someone trying to make music with several pots and pans and a wooden spoon. There were only four actors in the entire production and although they were dressed in the traditional Chinese costume, it was rather boring and not at all what we had expected. But we now can say that we did it and that was one more cultural experience that we were able to have.

We spent Wednesday traveling to the Great Wall at MuJian Yu, a trip of about two hours. Enroute, we visited a factory that produces beautiful vases. It was situated in an old square Chinese community home with the individual rooms opening onto a central court yard. The doors to the rooms were covered with old heavy blankets and inside was a scene that probably hasn't changed for centuries. There were women hunched over tables creating copper vases. They then glued thin metal wiring onto the copper vase in intricate designs. When this design was secured, other workers used an eyedropper and sucked up colored enamel into the dropper and then squeezed it out into the various areas enclosed by the wires to form beautiful designs. In the next room was the firing of the vases that was done for about five minutes in 1000-degree ovens and then a man sitting at a rotating wheel polished the vase before it returned to the women artists who would add the colored enamel again. The process would be repeated 10 times since each time the vase was fired the enamel would shrink a little. By the time

the vase had gone through this process 10 times it was a truly beautiful work of art.

Following this tour, we were ushered into a very modern show room and we looked over the finished products. Even the smallest vases were $30-$40 dollars and some were in the thousands of dollars. It was interesting to me that the workers were working in such deplorable conditions and yet the show room was nice, warm, and modern. It's hard to understand why the owners of the business don't upgrade the working facilities. Maybe they wanted us to pity the workers and that way we would buy more. I don't know but in America we wouldn't tolerate such conditions. Many things that I saw throughout our touring puzzled me.

Our next stop was the Great Wall. To call it great is an understatement. Just a few interesting facts. The wall originally was commissioned by the emperor to help the people defend against the warring nations that would come across their border and pillage and murder. Eventually the emperor decided to join all the small sections together to make the border truly impenetrable. This huge undertaking took over 10 years and involved one out of every five Chinese citizens. Millions of people worked on the wall, year-round, and many of them died before seeing the wall to its completion. The day we were there it was bitter cold even though we were wearing layers of coats, sweaters, long johns, thick socks, gloves, hats, and scarves. The wind was blowing and the only respite from the weather was in the corners of the watch towers that were built about every 100 yards on The Wall. Our guide told us that he was taking us to one of the steeper sections of the wall since our party was young and hardy and I knew immediately that I was in trouble. The day we climbed nearly a hundred steps to a pagoda in Beijing I really felt my age and I worried that this would be more of the same. It was.

We rode a cable car to the entrance to the wall and after going to one watch tower and back I knew that I needed to send the others on without me. The steps were so steep with no hand railings and it was like a roller coaster. I stayed in the watch tower and the others struck out with Tim at the lead. I think they were all determined not to be the one to say "Uncle" because it was nearly an hour and a half before they rejoined me in the tower after climbing to the distant fifth tower. Toward the end of my wait, I thought they might return to find an ice pillar encasing their mother. It was just so cold!

As for me, I was the official greeter in the tower and saw visitors from all over the world come and go. The Wall is truly an incredible accomplishment. Some of it is in disrepair but much of it is still pristine and thinking of the labor and sacrifices that it took to build just astounded me. I can't imagine surviving the winter weather let alone hauling the huge stones that it took and the logistics of feeding and sheltering all those workers. I imagine that being conscripted to work on it was a sort of death sentence.

It was interesting to me that whenever I asked our guide about certain policies of the present or past governments or rulers, he made it clear that he was not to question or comment about it. Communism still controls the citizens and in small and large ways they have learned to live with it and not rock the boat.

On our way home from the Great Wall we toured an ancient village that surrounded a beautiful lake. The lake was frozen solid and crowded with people ice skating and sitting on small ice sleighs being pushed around by their companion. Since central heating is a rarity except in the modern buildings, we learned to dress warmly to survive. Everyone we saw did the same and all the little stores had clerks who were bundled up and selling out of open-air shops.

That night John took us to a fancy restaurant to experience Peking duck. He ordered an elaborate meal including the famous duck roasted to perfection and we enjoyed sampling other Chinese cuisine. After returning to the hotel, we visited again about all we were seeing and peppered John with questions about what we had experienced. Thursday morning, we packed up our suitcases and gave ourselves plenty of time to get to the airport. John again saw us safely to our destination and then we hugged him good-bye and made our way through security. His flight wasn't until later that evening but he was going to try to get on an earlier one if possible. We so appreciated all the sacrifices that he and Laurel made to make this trip memorable for us. I know that they have "been there, done that" many times before and still they took the time and effort and money to ensure that we had a great time.

Our flight was without incident and despite an hour delay in San Francisco we arrived in Boise early afternoon. As we arrived at the port of entry in San Francisco both Tim and SaraKay

commented on how good it felt to be on American soil. We were all tired and a little dingy, but Tim said that he could tell we were back in America because people were smiling, and then he broke into "Oh, Beautiful for Spacious Skies" and we all started laughing. SaraKay topped that as we landed at the Boise airport and she sang, "And Here We Have Idaho." I agreed. I wanted to tap my heels together and say with Dorothy of Oz, "There's No Place Like Home!"

David and Andrea drove two cars to the airport so that we could head straight back home and not make our day even longer. I so appreciated their thoughtfulness since I was running on adrenaline after being awake for over 24 hours and just needed to push to get home where we could get back into things that needed to be done before SaraKay leaves for school Tuesday morning. We've both had jetlag and are still trying to get our bodies to sleep at night and function during the day. Thanks for everyone's prayers in our behalf. We truly felt the Lord's watch care over us and are grateful that nothing happened to mar our time in China.

January 12, 2011

Last week was kind of crazy as I just couldn't seem to get myself over my jet lag. When we went from here to China it seemed like I didn't have lag, but coming back was another story. Although I tried to go to bed at my usual time and stay up during the day, I found myself waking up at 1:00 a.m. and not being able to get back to sleep. I would eat some yogurt, read a book, check my email, and then lie back down and close my eyes but not always with good results. How frustrating! I know Tim had the same problem but he had to go to work each morning and couldn't grab a nap like I could so he had quite a week!

Sunday evening Mike and the girls came for the night and then left Monday morning for Rexburg. Mike had arranged for SaraKay to babysit the girls while he took care of some business and then they returned here for the rest of the afternoon.

I left Monday morning just a little ahead of him to pick up Sharen Moss and drive to Idaho Falls for our first big training day. We attended a prayer meeting and then started into our training. By 9:30 they had us on individual computers and were giving us a crash course in how they work and how to work the new familysearch.com. I was trying to follow the instructions of the presenter as well as coach Sharen who was on a computer at my side but it was hard to do both and by the time 1:00 rolled around, we were both pretty frazzled. We left the Center about 1:30 and drove home, talking all the way about what we had learned and what we hadn't learned. Sharen hasn't had experience on the computer so she was even more overwhelmed than I was. We decided to meet today at 10:00 and go through the handouts we were given and refresh our memories about what we were taught. I met with her this morning and helped her get on Jim's computer and learn a few functions and procedures. I took it slowly and she was very appreciative. Part way through she started to get weepy and I thought that maybe she was just too frustrated with it all but she said, "I'm crying because I feel like Helen Keller when she finally figured out what her teacher was trying to teach her. I haven't thought that I could ever learn the computer and now here I am starting to understand it!" That was a sweet moment for us both.

The instructor in my computer class gave us a glossary of terms and also instructions on how to do the different functions and it has been so nice to have that handout to refer to. I'm learning a lot and excited about it although it is rather intimidating to think of helping patrons with their personal research. In President Monson's message in the January Ensign, he says that the Lord will qualify those that he calls so Sharen and I are hanging on to that promise.

In the orientation the Center director said that we should notify all of our family and friends that we are now family history missionaries and that we must dedicate ourselves to it and take our responsibilities seriously even though we are still living at home and carrying on with many of our normal pursuits. He said that we may have to say "no" to some things. So, I'm trying to simplify my life although I've pretty much done that this past year as I have worked on my histories. Anyway, for the next five weeks I will have training each Monday and temple on Friday. After my training I will work two days a week at the Center and one day at the temple.

I enjoyed having Mike here Monday afternoon and we worked together in the kitchen to fix a late lunch and just let Amber and Ellie play downstairs. Marci had a doctor's appointment for Olivia and stayed home to take care of that. It made for a fun afternoon for me and hopefully for them, too. I appreciated Mike's help with putting away the boxes of Christmas decorations. The

box with the tree is so heavy and I wasn't able to manhandle it alone so Mike handily got in on a shelf so that I could pack the other things around it and feel like Christmas was put away for another year.

January 17, 2011

I just got back from my second training session. We went directly to the computer lab following the morning devotional at 8:45 and stayed at the computer screen for the next four hours except for a five-minute break at 11:00. Sharen and I both were ready to call it a day and head home. I can see the value of what they are helping us learn but it's a lot to absorb in a short while. The instructors are so patient with us and there are also other helpers who walk around the room offering assistance. After training on several map, obituary, and city sites, I am beginning to wonder how anyone did research before the advent of the computer. We really do have wonderful research aides at our fingertips and much of it can be downloaded onto our home computers although a few of the sites are only available at the Family History Center. It was so thrilling to log in to my own new familysearch.org site and have my family information appear along with the greeting, "Welcome, Susan Larsen." I think that I mentioned last week that if I am on duty at the FHC and I don't have a patron to assist, then I am expected to work on my own family lines. It's certainly empowering to be learning all of this.

Let me mention something I learned about Josh from a visit I had with Stephani last night. He will be flying to New York to attend a debate tournament at Columbia University Wednesday-Sunday. He and his partner compete in public forum. In this particular area of debate each debater prepares arguments for both sides of an issue and then when they arrive at the tournament it is randomly determined which side of the issue they will argue. Each month a new topic is chosen and of course, new preparation and research must happen for the teams to be prepared to compete. Josh and his companion attended a tournament in Pocatello last week and out of 48 teams from around the region, they placed second! Josh debated seven times and on both sides of the issue so it was quite a workout and wonderful accomplishment. Anyway, they will travel to NY and compete and see how they get along. There are several other debaters going with them so it should be really fun!

SaraKay spent the long holiday weekend at school catching up on homework and getting a jump on her classes. She tried out to play on an intramural basketball team and the practices and games will start this week. It took all the courage she could muster to do it and she's not sure how it will work out for her but she hopes that the regular practice sessions and scheduled games will help her keep fit. When she exercises on her own it just doesn't get done sometimes and she is committed to being more regular with it. I'm so grateful for my walking group but this new assignment at the FHC is going to alter my workouts so I have got to find another way.

Last week a member of the stake RS presidency called and asked if I would do a seminar on "Surviving Widowhood" at this year's annual stake Relief Society Women's conference. I'm not sure two years qualifies me to give any advice but I'm talking to some other women who have been at this longer and I'm getting some good advice and ideas. It will be two years the end of this month since Daddy died. I was looking through the family letters for something the other day and came across the family letters for January of 2009. It struck me just how life was going on as normal right up until that last week of January and then it hit! Sometimes it still doesn't seem real to me. I'm trying not to get the blues right now as the second anniversary approaches but I think a little melancholy is inevitable and okay. Anyway, I hope I can do the topic justice and help other women to understand some of the things that they can do now to prepare for when the time may come to move on alone.

February 1, 2011

It's a bitterly cold day today with a windchill factor of -18! When I went to the church this morning to walk, I was stunned by the bite in the wind and couldn't help hoping that people have warm homes and lots of blankets to keep them warm in this extreme weather. I got on the phone to call BSA Benefits and the receptionist said that the pension department was closed because of extreme weather conditions and would be open when conditions improved. I know that the East coast has really been under assault this winter so I feel fortunate that for the most part we have been able to get around and life could carry on.

My weekend was made sweet by the visits of Stephani and Steve. They arrived Friday evening and we enjoyed a leisurely supper and visiting. I have been compiling a long list of computer

questions anticipating their visit and so after supper we got started on that list and went non-stop until almost midnight. They are both so good with technology and really helped me with some of the things that are slowing me down with my family history work. Before the night was over, they suggested getting me a larger screen, especially to help with importing pictures into my manuscript on Volume 2 of Larsen Legacy. At first I resisted, but I soon realized that it would be so helpful also with my genealogy since much of the time I am back and forth between two or three different screens and having a larger monitor would really make it easier to manage. So, I relented and on Saturday we picked up a new monitor and Steve installed it for me.

As most of you are aware, my internet provider has almost driven me to drink lately and at Tim's insistence and everyone's encouragement, I finally called Cable One and switched over, which was no small feat. The first serviceman that came took one look at my set-up and said that I needed to get an electrician to run a wire in the attic and drop it down into my computer room and that he wasn't qualified to do that. He suggested that I disconnect my computer, move my huge desk out from the wall, run the wire down through the hole in the closet ceiling, through the wall at the side of my computer desk. It sounded like such a lot of work and I hated the idea of disturbing my situation especially since I can't do most of that myself and to do it when Steve and Steph were here would have taken so much of our time and energy when I needed their help for so many other things. After the repairman left, I was really out of sorts because I hated feeling so helpless with it all. All afternoon I wrestled with what to do and all at once it came to me that if I was going to have a cable dropped down in from the attic, why couldn't I have it dropped clear down in the wall exposed under my computer desk so that we didn't have to have it moved out. I got on my hands and knees and looked at the situation and sure enough, there was plenty of space under the desk for an outlet. So the next day I called an electrician, Caleb Wheeler, and ask if he could give me a bid on dropping the cable. He said that the newer homes have these cables already in them but the older homes don't and that they do a lot of that kind of work for people. He said he would give me a bid and I thought their bid was reasonable and so I scheduled a time for them to come.

Friday morning they arrived and got up into my attic through the opening in the ceiling of the computer room closet. Originally they planned to go in through the attic opening in the garage but I guess it isn't big enough for a person to crawl through so I had to empty the closet and they went in through that opening. They cut through the wall and installed an outlet for me and were through in just a little over an hour. What a relief! And...my internet is lightning fast and so nice to work with.

Saturday Stephani, Steve, and I drove to Rexburg and spent part of the day with SaraKay. I hadn't seen her apartment and so we took a tour of that and then went to lunch together. After that we went on a tour of the new I-Center that was recently dedicated. What an amazing building! You just have to see it to believe it! One large part of it is an auditorium and the outside curved walls are covered with beautiful 10–12-foot paintings of the life of Christ by Carl Bloch. Most of them were familiar to us, especially the one of the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and the one of the disciples laying his body in the sepulcher. It was such a spiritual experience to just walk along that wall and contemplate the beauty of the paintings and the Savior's life of service and sacrifice.

Attached to this amazing auditorium is a complex of eight gyms, tennis courts, and an indoor walking arena. The whole facility was buzzing with activity from intramural teams playing basketball to young couples running on the track pushing baby strollers and others just walking and getting in their morning stroll. What a wonderful facility for that school and the others who live close and undoubtedly will share in its use. It doesn't seem possible that BYU-I has taken such a giant step forward in its facilities! SaraKay was noticeably proud of the campus and also took us to the Manwaring Center which has also been newly remodeled and resembles the Cougar Eat in size and offerings. There are also two skywalks that connect these buildings to nearby buildings and facilitate the movement between these major centers during bad weather. I was absolutely amazed at the improvements and what it portends for that college.

After we returned home late that afternoon, we continued with my computer session and Steve and Stephani oriented me on accessing my digital pictures and dragging and dropping them into the document instead of me having to do all the scanning that has been so much a part of the last book. By the time we made it to bed that night I felt like my head was hurting with all the new

ideas and things I had been taught. I so appreciated their visit and help to me with this continuing family history project.

On Sunday morning we made a visit to the cemetery. Steve took his camera and we were able to get some good shots. It was a beautiful, peaceful morning and we stood there by the headstone and visited for quite a while about life without Daddy and some of the tender mercies we have witnessed since his passing. Steph made the comment that when she comes home, she feels Daddy's presence in our house but not necessarily at the cemetery. I agreed with her although I have tried to keep the headstone clean and decorate it on Memorial Day. I know that that ground is sacred and will play a key role on resurrection morning when Grandpa Allan, Grandma Barbara, and Daddy all rise, clothed in their immortal bodies. That's a wonderful thought!

Before we left for sacrament meeting, I asked Steve for a blessing and he gave me a beautiful son's priesthood blessing. He gave me counsel regarding my mission call and regarding our family and I felt so strengthened and buoyed up. I visited with several of you children prior to the weekend and you expressed sorrow that you couldn't be here with us on this second anniversary of Dad's passing. I know how you feel. I was so much in that role regarding my own parents as they aged and went through the trials of illness and confinement. I just wasn't in a situation that allowed me much freedom but I knew they understood and accepted it. I know that many of you would like to be more help to me but I also know that circumstances make that impossible. Just know that I understand and that those who live close are taking good care of me.

My long day at the FHC was rewarding. I always feel like I've been through the wringer after my four-hour computer class. It is just so new and there are so many things to remember and digest. We had zone conference at five so we took a sack lunch and stayed the rest of the day until the conference. It gave us a chance for some one-on-one with some of the microfilm and microfiche technology. I have watched the patrons at the Center and have decided that as a missionary I will be teaching and helping but I think that I will also have a lot of time to work on my own projects. Steve and Steph set me up to get on "Dropbox" so that I can access my manuscript from the Center and work on that if I am not busy with patrons. As I do start into research, I will be able to have the help of the more experienced missionaries when I need their expertise. I still am pretty overwhelmed with all I'm learning but trusting that in time it will start to get easier. Each Tuesday during my shift I will attend an hour-long training in PAF 5 that will be taught for 12 weeks.

February 6, 2011

Congratulations to Mike and Marci! I would counsel that we should all think "boy" but they have three such cute girls I know they won't mind getting another. Anyway, I'm always glad that the secret is out and I don't have to keep it quiet anymore! Welcome home to John and Laurel and family, too. It's a relief to know they survived their travels and are safely back to Shanghai.

This past week has been a little bit "the best of times and the worst of times." My Monday training at the FHC was some of the most difficult yet. I feel like I've got a head full of all this new information and I can hardly absorb more. Our instructor wasn't as patient and much of what was covered was just beyond my capacity to grasp. Sharen and I took lunches because we needed to stay until 5:00 for zone conference and so after our formal training was over for the day, we met with one of the missionaries at the Center and he reviewed the procedures for the microfilm and fiche machines and we had hands-on which helped immensely. We also had time to get on a computer and I was able to access my "dropbox" account and spent a few minutes on my manuscript before it was zone conference time.

When we get on the floor we can put into practice these software programs (Irfanview, new.familysearch, PAF, Familytree, ad infinitas (that's what Dad called it when it goes on forever) and then I will see how they all fit together.

I felt badly that I wasn't able to do much in the way of helping Sharen either. We are both in over our heads I'm afraid. We're moving ahead on faith at this point. I read somewhere this week that family history research is complicated and I believe that is so if you get too far back although I suspect that many church members have a lot that can be accessed quite easily. Two of the new FHC missionaries have only been members for a short while and are the first member in their family to join the church so I imagine they are going to have a lot of success when they get the gist of it and start on their lines. Anyway, I need your prayers. I'm determined to learn this stuff and get proficient.

On Tuesday I had my yearly physical and got a clean bill of health. I still have a few diagnostic tests results to get back but things check out okay for now. I so appreciate my good health and recognize that this time of my life is a wonderful pause between the work of raising a family and the trials of old age.

On Wednesday I spent the day on Volume 2 of Larsen Legacy. Using my new wide monitor, my new Cable One connection, and my growing capacity at the computer, I had a great day and made a lot of progress. Thursday morning I got up and got on "dropbox" and couldn't find my updated work of the day before. I was just sick. I hunted in all the places I knew of to hunt and wanted to stamp my foot and cry! I knew that I couldn't call Steve in such a frame of mind since he and Steph went to so much work to help me upgrade and get organized into files, so I spent the day doing other things and about four emailed Steve with my problem. Within a couple of minutes, he was on the line and we started the process of trying to recover what was lost. (I just realized that we have the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, but no such parable about the lost "computer file.") Anyway, two hours later we were still searching to no avail. I felt so badly to lay that on Steve but he is such a whiz at the computer and my best hope for recovery of the information. At six he had other commitments and told me that he would call back later. Bonnie called about nine but they were still at the company dinner and then Steve called and ten and I told him that I would be in the temple all day Friday and half the night with our ward's chapel session that evening so we scheduled to talk Saturday morning.

Friday was my temple day. It was so good to be back after our three-week break. I was learning a new position (helping with own endowment) and it was fun to interact with new sisters. The day passed quickly and then after our shift Brenda and I went through a session since we had a couple of hours before our ward was to meet for the chapel session. What a sweet day! And what a thrill to be with the leadership of our ward in the temple.

Saturday morning I spent another couple of hours with Steve on the phone but we both were resigned to the fact that somehow, something I had done had erased my Wednesday's work. He felt terrible and I felt terrible and I felt terrible that he felt terrible but the fact remained that I needed to redo the section and just move on. After a session with him on "Backup" and "Saving" I spent the rest of the day working on the manuscript and it went fine.

This morning Stephani called again since she had called while I was working with Steve on Saturday and so was aware of what was going on. I rehearsed the situation with her. She also felt terrible (somehow having two more people feel terrible made me feel a little less terrible) but I told her that I am just grateful that I didn't lose all my work. I remembered my first experience using the computer for word processing and how I wrote a family letter and thought I had saved it but discovered that I had inadvertently deleted it. I was so heartbroken and at that point I asked myself, "Is this really worth it?" What a crazy thing to think! How grateful I am that I persisted (and Daddy and all you kids insisted that I persisted) in learning it. I can't imagine my life right now without email, Facebook, Word, online banking and checking, autopay bills, ad infinitas (wow, twice in one letter!) Anyway, I'm up and going and back on the computer and the crisis is passed. Thank you, Steve and Steph, for rescuing me.

This morning I have been preparing for my Relief Society Stake Women's Conference presentation. I've got my visual aids and handout ready and most of my materials in mind. SaraKay counseled me to use some humor so I've been trying to think what there is about being a widow that is funny. Any suggestions with that would be appreciated.

February 20, 2011

I realized on Thursday that I had failed to send out a letter last week. All week I was gathering, composing, and refining my presentations for the weekend. Thankfully that is over and I can move on with life. I felt good about my presentation at our stake's Relief Society Women's Conference on Saturday and okay about my talk today in sacrament meeting. It's nice to have them both over.

This will be my first week working two full days at the Family History Center and I'm hoping that I can enjoy my time there. The weather has been nice and the roads clear and I'm hoping that spring is on the way. About this time of year, I get tired of all the cold and dark and snow as I'm sure the rest of you do (except Becky of course).

Last week we had three birthdays in the family. On Tuesday I called both Jared and Camille but neither of them was home so I left

messages. I also called Laurel since hers is a day later but since China is a day ahead of us it was just right to call her the same day as Jared and Camille. We had a sweet but short visit since John was up and fixing her a special breakfast and the household was up and about getting ready for school. On Saturday Jared called me to say thanks for his gift and I asked him if he had done something special for his birthday. He said that he had gotten a unicycle and an MRI. I was with SaraKay in town shopping when Jared called and when he said, "MRI" I wasn't sure I heard right and questioned him on it. Well, MRI was exactly what he said. He had been playing soccer and someone kicked him and sent him tumbling and he hit his knee on a patch of ice. After going to the hospital, they discovered he had a torn meniscus as well as some deep bone bruises. He is in a leg brace and on crutches and will not be playing any ball for 4-8 weeks until things heal. I think he has had more injuries than all the other Wellsville Larsens combined. Maybe all the other Larsen grandchildren combined! Not an enviable situation to be in. But anyway, good luck to you, Jared. And good luck to Bonnie and Steve trying to keep him inactive for such a long period of time.

A couple of weeks ago Mike and Marci called and suggested that we meet in Pocatello for lunch on Valentines' weekend. I had a different idea and suggested that they come on the 17th and attend SaraKay's Collegiate Choir Concert with me. They like the idea and so on Thursday they arrived and we had a quick supper before we got the babysitter and then left for Rexburg. We had a sweet visit enroute and thoroughly enjoyed the chance to support SaraKay in her concert. She not only participates in the choir but she accompanied two of the numbers and really enjoyed that. Afterwards we spent some time visiting, went for ice cream, and then dropped her off at her apartment and headed home. What a nice evening!

One thing that we included in our trip was a quick stop at the BYU-I Alumni Office. Earlier that week the secretary from the office called to say that now that the new Manwaring Center was completed that the decision was made to return the "Woman of the Year" portraits to the women and not use them anymore. I told the secretary that I would be in town on Thursday and able to drop in and get my picture. I guess in 2006 the college discontinued their "Woman of the Year" and any queen contests and hence I have inherited the portrait. Well, we had the portrait in the back seat of my car and as we drove home Mike asked me what I was going to do with it. I told him that I was going to hide it under my bed. We had a good laugh over what in the world anyone would do with a personal picture that big. Anyway, after we arrived home, I drove the babysitter home and when I returned and we were heading to bed, Mike asked if I had noticed anything different and I knew he had been up to no good. I looked at him, the kitchen, the dining room, anything I could think of but I didn't see anything different and he said he would show me what he had done in the morning. Well, my curiosity was getting the best of me so he said that he wanted me to look on the computer. I walked down the hall and all at once I was staring my portrait in the face! He and Marci had removed the picture in the living room and substituted it for the "Woman of the Year" picture! It looked so bizarre and caught me up short! We all had a good laugh over it before I took it down and stowed it under the bed. Later I got to thinking that maybe if I get lonely, I could hang it up somewhere and pretend like I had roommate.

SaraKay arrived home on Friday for the long weekend and it has been nice to have her here for a few days. We attended a reception for one of her Chamber friends, attended the Women's Conference, watched a Hallmark movie, and just relaxed. We've also had lots of time for late night chats and a little shopping at Wal-Mart. She is enjoying her semester and looking forward to April when the Collegiate Choir will go on tour to the Midwest. She thinks she has the best of both worlds in that she gets to sing as well as accompany. She loves the kids in the choir and feels like she has found her niche. It's nice to have her so happy with what she is studying. She has yet to hear where she will be student teaching but should find out in the next few weeks. Lots of decisions and planning ahead for us to have her graduate, student teach and get ready to leave on a mission in December.

February 27, 2011

Today dawned sunny but cold, in the single digits as the weatherman predicted. We have had a little of everything this week including wind, light snow, heavy snow, sunny skies and today we're expecting rain. This time of year, the weather patterns are always a little frustrating with the hope of spring and yet knowing that for this area, spring will not truly "sprung" for many more

weeks. Or as Dad would say, "Spring has sprung, the grass has ris, where the heck the flowers is?" I'm sure he wasn't quoting Shakespeare or Alfred Lord Tennyson but somehow the short poem expresses my feelings about this time of year.

My week was a busy one. Busy at least for me. When I talk with you children and you rehearse your comings and goings, I marvel at how you do it and keep your sanity. But how grateful I am that each of you have the resources to care for your families and to have many of the nice things in life. I know that there are many who are out of work right now and I'm grateful that you have what you need. Let me mention just a sentence or two about each family.

Steph continues to teach full time, attend two classes at USU, prepare for the upcoming stake youth conference, and support Josh in his final weeks of his junior year debate. He consistently brings home trophies. State finals are in two weeks. Sam continues to find joy in Yelm, Washington as he so graphically describes in his weekly letters home and Katie continues to enjoy her journalism classes at the "Y." Lindsay has been busy helping his brother Chris relocate and upgrade his situation.

Andersons are feeling like a great weight has been lifted since the sale of their Smithfield home. Randy has settled in and feels like his job is do-able. They are planning a family vacation later this spring which will give them all a chance to escape the rigors of family, YW responsibilities, and "doctoring" for a few days.

Jonie reports that taking care of her newest arrival, Jackson, has been a particular delight. He is growing and fun to have around.

Steve and Bonnie oversee a busy household. Steve spent the weekend attending Wood Badge. His friend's father was the course director and Steve committed to attend this year. Some of the courses are taught on weekends for those who can't give an entire week of their summer so that is what Steve is doing. Bonnie mentioned to me that Mike Marchese, the Scout Executive for their Council, gave recognition to Steve during one of the sessions, as the son of Steve Larsen and as part of a great scouting legacy. (A sweet moment for Steve.

The Larsens of Boise. It's a wild ride at their busy house with senior Laurel, closing in on her graduation day. This is the time for nostalgia when Dave and Andrea will find themselves asking, "Where have the years gone?' I haven't heard just where Laurel will be going to school but I suspect she will follow the money either to Provo or Rexburg. I'm sure these next few months will be so busy but very satisfying.

Becky just arrived home last night after running in a relay with 12 other women. It included three separate "legs" that Becky ran totaling over 21 miles and an equal amount for the other ladies. They moved from race to race in a van and had lots of time to laugh and visit although not nearly enough time to sleep. Chet took care of the home front for her and the kids had lots of fun eating out, going to movies, and enjoying their dad. Becky's two on-line Masters classes are coming along fine.

John and Laurel have settled in after their fun Chinese New Year trip to Cambodia. John is enjoying his branch presidency work and all the kids are happily involved in their pursuits.

Mike and Marci are plenty involved caring for three preschoolers and keeping up with being bishop. Marci is feeling a little better these days now that the initial morning sickness time has passed. This year will be the big year that they pay off their student loans and give a big hooray about that!

Paul and Jenny are keeping up their frenetic pace, as usual. They are more than ready for spring to arrive and let the kids run outside and work off some of their energy. Beth and Ben are enjoying school, Jenny keeps the home fires burning, and Paul is heavily involved in his YM calling as well as at work. Dow Chemical is doing well and Paul said the future looks bright at this point.

Tim just completed a major home improvement project. He personally refinished his kitchen cabinets and a new roommate bartered with him to exchange rent for installing marble counter tops in his kitchen as well as his bathrooms. He is very pleased with the result. Tim's work at Scentsy has been challenging with all the beginning of the year tax demands and all the extra projects that have come his way.

SaraKay continues to thrive on her time at BYU-I. She was attending an SRC (student council) meeting the other day and met a student who knew Steve and had attended Cedar Badge as one of the leaders for two years when Daddy was director. It was such a fun interaction and gave her an instant connection. He told her that Daddy

was always encouraging the Cedar Badge boys to date his youngest daughter and now he had finally met her! What fun for both of them. (Now what about a date?)

I put in my first two full days at the Center this week. I thought we would never get through the first day it dragged on so slowly but on Wednesday I took a pedigree chart that I got from my genealogy stash in the closet and started doing research and Wednesday just flew by. I'm excited to get into my own records and see if I can find anyone. I continue to feel somewhat overwhelmed with the volume of knowledge that I'm expected to know but this must be where the "exercising faith" comes in. Anyway, remember that Tuesday and Wednesday are Center days and Friday is temple day but I'm available evenings so don't hesitate to call if you need me.

March 6, 2011

I awoke this morning to a beautiful winter wonderland. It fell so softly in the night that I had no idea that everything was being blanketed and winter had returned. Just this week I was reading that although we've had one of the driest February's on record, our snow pack is still over 100% of normal. Maybe March will make up for February. The nice thing about snow this time of year is that it doesn't usually accumulate and so it's a minor distraction instead of a major event like it is earlier in the season.

Gary called last night with some fun news. Ashley and Jeff are the proud parents of a 7 lb. 11oz. little boy, Berkeley J. They are living in North Carolina where Jeff is getting his training for the Navy and Linda flew back this week to help the new mother and love on that little grandson! Gary told me of a tender mercy that Jeff and Ashley experienced recently. There has been an older couple in their ward that has taken an interest in them and invited them to dinner a couple of weeks ago. As they visited over dinner their host ask them about their families and it came out that Ashley was a Larsen from Idaho. The gentleman said that he had been good friends with a fellow who was a Larsen from Idaho and as they visited further, they discovered that Grandpa Allan's brother, Bim (J. Berkeley, Jr.) was the friend of their host! He retrieved a picture and it included Bim's family, including Grandpa Allan! What a small world and what an amazing coincidence for Ashley to be befriended by someone so familiar with her extended family! Best wishes to the new parents!

My week has been a busy but rewarding one. It started out last Sunday evening with a phone call from Paul. He had been playing Mr. Mom for three days while Jenny and little Kate flew West for a Cutler girls' weekend. Paul (with the help of various of Jenny's close friends) was holding down the fort at home. Jenny was returning Monday morning so he was scurrying around the house and putting things back in order before retiring for the night. It reminded me of years gone by and of how hard Sundays were on our house. It seemed like even though we went into Sunday with things in order and food prepared, inevitably by Sunday night it was like a bomb had gone off and the house was in total disarray. Anyway, I appreciated Paul's phone call and his capacity to "keep the home fires burning" while Jenny took a time out. Nothing like an absentee mother to increase a family's appreciation for all she does to keep things running smoothly.

Throughout the week leading up to March 4th I heard from many of you children, concerned for me and my upcoming wedding anniversary on Friday. Steph wondered if she should come spend the weekend but I assured her that I would be in the temple and that I wasn't feeling especially vulnerable. When Shauntel called, we visited about quite a few different things and then later I received an email from her. She told me of an experience Archie had and it was so touching that I asked if I could include it in this letter. Archie agreed. Let me just copy and paste it as Shauntel wrote:

Mom, so it's been on my mind this week that it is your wedding anniversary and I've been thinking ever since I hung up the phone with you about how strange it is that we can know that Dad has passed away and yet have such vivid memories of him and such a strong feeling of his presence that at the same time it is hard to believe he is gone. This last Sunday was Fast meeting for us because of stake conference this weekend and Archie has been wanting to bear his testimony about an experience he had 5 weeks ago. I want to tell you about it. He was outside with a friend climbing a big tree in our woods. He got quite a way up in the tree and then started to panic because he didn't know how to get down. I was running an errand and wasn't available to help. He was so distraught that he asked his nonmember friend to pray with him for help. He said that he finished his prayer and then heard a voice in his head tell him to go down the same way he came up. This gave him the confidence

and know-how to get himself out of the tree. When he told me this story later he said, "But the voice didn't sound like I thought Jesus would sound. It sounded more like Grandpa Steve who died." This was a special experience for him, so much so that he told his teacher about it at school and bore his testimony about it last Sunday. I was interested in the statement about the voice sounding like Dad. It made me wonder lots of things, like how involved is Dad in our lives and what memories does Arch have of him stored away in his brain that were triggered by the voice, and how similar the construct in our brains is of Dad and Heavenly Father so that we group them together when receiving an impression from "Father." Anyway, I just wanted to share this with you. You are a wonderful example of a survivor -- I love you. Shauntel

Even though I have read this account many times, I still get emotional thinking about it. I won't draw any conclusions or theorize on it, but I appreciated Archie sharing it. The thought of Archie and his friend perched in a tall tree and praying for help also made me smile. All those FHE's and Primary classes paid off.

I gave my widow presentation at the West Stake yesterday and had a good group and enjoyed the opportunity to reconnect with many of my friends there. They had a wonderful Preparedness Fair sponsored by the Relief Society and the men were also invited and prior to my presentation I went around and saw many of the booths. I was so interested in one booth that displayed a home windmill that is mounted on a 45-foot pole and a solar panel that was made of aluminum pop cans that had been coated with black charcoal paint and mounted in an 8x4 ft. wooden box. Between the solar panel and the windmill, the household was able to generate most of their power and heating needs. It was fascinating. I read in the LDS Living Magazine about a BYU team that has invented a prosthetic leg from PVC pipe that will sell for about $25 and that the team is now making available to third world countries. I love it! In fact, I am going to add another session to our family reunion agenda. It is "Inventors Extravaganza" and we will challenge each person to come with an invention or an idea for one and share it with the rest of us. I already have something in mind so let the grandkids know and come July we will host our own science fair…either an idea or an actual replica. Go for it!

My days at the FH Center were a mixed bag. On one hand I am learning so much but on the other I am frustrated because I'm not learning quickly enough to be very effective. I keep reminding myself that what I'm learning will last me a lifetime (until the technology changes) and that I need to be patient but I've never been good at being patient. My recent frustration is with flash drives and transporting my PAF information back and forth from home to the Center. One of you kids suggested that I just put my PAF info on Dropbox and not worry about a flash drive. That is just what I should do and maybe teach the rest of the Center to do the same. If someone has the internet, they could just do that and forget the flash drives and all that razzmatazz.

By the way, the longer I am at the Center the more inspired I am with the patrons and the missionaries and the devotion I see. Last week I sat in on a help session with a 60ish businessman who had come by for a couple of hours. He asked for help and was assigned to a fellow who is a quadriplegic. Brother Staples comes in with his daughter and manipulates his wheelchair with a control close to his mouth. He speaks haltingly but he is sharp and he worked with the businessman for over an hour, coaching him and helping him search census records from 1790 forward. Many times, his daughter had to help with clarifying what he was saying because his speech is rather garbled but there was no question that he knew what he was doing. There are others who come on crutches, canes, stooped with age, and some who are young and vibrant; but they are there doing a great work. I am feeling like I am in the presence of giants and learning a good lesson in service and devotion. I certainly am strengthened as I walk the halls of two sacred places, the FH Center and temple.

I'm going to close. (Aren't you proud of me for not spending this whole letter bemoaning BYU basketball?) But of course, I do want to comment on it because it is such an exceptional example of putting honor ahead of fame. When I read in the newspaper about the ball player who had broken the honor code and who wouldn't be playing for them anymore and of BYU's subsequent loss to the Lobo's, I was just sick. But I couldn't help thinking what a huge statement BYU is making, with the nation looking on, about integrity and holding the line in defense of standards. From what I have heard, I think the media has been good to show support and that has been a nice surprise.

One more thing and then I will close. As I thought about fasting today, I decided to make mine a fast

of thanksgiving for all the many blessings our extended family has received this past year. We have our challenges but we are enjoying a time of happiness and freedom from accident and injury. Each family has sufficient for our needs and we have had many prayers answered. I recognize the Lord's watch care over us. How can we help but rejoice?

March 13, 2011

We've enjoyed wonderful spring weather the last few days. Yesterday I worked in the yard for several hours, clearing away branches and dead leaves that have littered the back yard all winter. It was warm and there was only a whisper of a breeze. The snow geese flew overhead heralding the coming of spring. Some of you older children will remember that when we lived on the farm the spring brought huge ponds of winter runoff and the snow geese would land in those ponds and fill the air with their cries. It was one of the fun things that happened each year about this time, especially if we had had a heavy snowfall and there was a lot of snow to melt and fill the low spots in the fields.

It always amazes me that everything in the yard looked so dead and desolate but that when I went out and walked around, I could see new life springing up everywhere. It reminds me that when I experience times of desolation or discouragement that I need to remember that the Lord is at work in my life even though it isn't always obvious.

My time at the FH Center is more enjoyable now. We still take classes but the pressure is off and we can continue building on what we've been taught in our training. I've had a dilemma lately. Two of the women that were trained with me have needed my help to get them going on their own research but if I help them, I don't get much time to address my own family history. So I've asked the Lord, "It is important for me to hand them off to someone else or to just put aside my own research for now and get them headed in the right direction on theirs?" I will admit it has been a little frustrating but I think the answer is that I should view my time at the library as a time of serving and just put aside my own for a season. It has been second nature to me to be able to see what I need to do to get into researching my ancestors but these sisters don't seem to be able yet to catch the vision of how to do it so they have taken a lot of mentoring. One of them has been a member for less than a year and of course, she has lots of family to research and discover. I also feel that she is pretty delicate and that Sharen and I are her best friends at the Center. She is preparing for the temple and has lots of questions about that and wants to talk those through during our lunch hour. Anyway, I'm trying to be patient and recognize that there may be many individuals working on my lines and that she is the only member of her family and really needs to make a beginning. I'm trying to sort it out.

My day in the temple was sweet. I am assigned to help the new brides and one of the own endowment girls that came in was in the same program at BYU-I as SaraKay and knew her very well. It was fun to make that connection with her. She wasn't getting ready for a mission but just made the decision to receive her endowment. Ever since the Rexburg Temple opened, we don't get nearly the number of brides that we used to and that's a disappointment since it is so fun to help people who are coming to the temple for the very first time. When I helped in the initiatory Melanie Hanni just happened to be a patron and it was pretty teary for both of us. She is such a dear friend and wrestles with some very weighty problems in her family but she is such an example of righteousness to me.

March 20, 2011

It's a beautiful, sunny day outside although frost covers everything and reminds me that the season is still in transition. It was interesting yesterday. It was sunny, then cloudy, then it started blowing, and then we had a full-blown snow storm for about an hour. Soon it cleared up and remained cold but calm. It just goes to show that the adage, "If you don't like the weather in Idaho, just wait a moment and it will change" is certainly true. I happened to be in CAL Ranch during part of the storm picking out soil sterilizer, grass seed, and Caseron. It cost me about $100 before I was through but I've learned that "a stitch in time saves nine" and that if I can apply these chemicals now, I will save myself a lot of work later. The grass seed is for the area opened up after we removed the big ponderosa pine at the side of the garage. That removal has made the back yard so much easier to mow. The name of the game right now is "simplify" and so I'm trying to get things to the point that someone else could come in and care for this yard without too much hassle.

My time at the FHCenter is getting more enjoyable as I become slightly more proficient in using the

software. The key word in that sentence is "slightly." I hope "slow but sure" can apply to my situation although sometimes the word "sure" seems a stretch. It always amazes me that there are so many patrons. On Tuesday we were so crowded that some of the missionaries who weren't helping patrons didn't have computers to use for their own research. It was wonderful! I continue to take the classes that are offered and each time I do I learn something new.

My day in the temple was sweet. We took care of two sisters in the Own Endowment area. One was about 35 and had come for her own endowment, a sealing to her husband, and then being sealed to their three children. Most of the women who come seem very timid and unsure but once they get going, they are very pleased and touched by the endowment. The young mother seemed so unsure of herself but during the initiatory she started to cry and soon we were all crying with her. It was like all the years of waiting were over and she was so happy to finally be in the temple. Later that day I took a turn in the Youth Center where the children of the couple were being cared for. The children were 15, 12, and 9 years old so it wasn't as much babysitting as just enjoying the kids. We put puzzles together, played checkers, and watched some church videos before the children got dressed in their white clothes and were taken to the sealing room to meet their parents and all the guests that were there with them. What a wonderful and sweet occasion!

The other sister was 87 and carried an oxygen tank with her. She was so overjoyed to be there and her escort was her 91-year-old sister! As we took her through the initiatory part of the endowment she was obviously touched and later told me that she had dreamed the night before of part of it. She was all smiles. She was so thin that we had to pin up her knee highs with safety pins! A couldn't help thinking about the parable of the laborers and of the Savior paying them all the same wages. How grateful I felt for this woman's decision to come to the temple!

I've heard from several of you this past week. You've asked how everyone is doing and I've had to admit that the last month has been pretty much free of accident or injury. Several of you have been battling the flu but nothing that required hospitalization. Some of you have done some traveling (Shauntel and family to Florida, Becky to their Heber cabin, Mike and Marci to SLC) but we are enjoying a time of peace as a family. I know everyone is involved and busy but thank goodness for good health and the resources that each of you have to provide for your families. I, too, am enjoying good health and safety and grateful for the resources I have available to me that I am able to enjoy the comfortable lifestyle that I do. I feel the Lord's watch care over me each day.

Last Sunday morning I got up about 4:30 to use the bathroom and went back to bed hoping that I could go back to sleep. I fell asleep and had a dream. I became aware that Daddy was in the bedroom standing near the bed and he sat down on the side of the bed and I moved over so that there would be room for him. It was reminiscent of many Sunday mornings in years past when he would be up early for meetings and would carefully and quietly get himself ready without waking me. Sometimes just before he would go, he would sit on the side of the bed and we would exchange a few words before he left for his day of meetings. I don't remember in the dream that he said anything to me, but I remember expressing my love and thanking him for providing me with what I need for these years of being alone. That was all but when I awoke, I was so affected by the experience that I could hardly get it off my mind. It just seemed so real.

I have spent all week wondering about it. Did he really come and did he come to say good-bye or did he come to assure me that he is near? Was this assurance needed because I'm alone or because in the year ahead I will need to look back on that dream for comfort? I don't know. I even debated whether to mention it but I have decided that I would. I've never felt that he was very far away but I've also hoped that he would trust in our family to move ahead in his absence and to enable him to not worry too much about us so that he could do the work he needs to be doing. I'm not sure how it is for him but I suspect he is happily teaching the gospel and building the Kingdom. Richard G. Scott once said, "Good marriages can still thrive even if one spouse is beyond the veil." That is probably not a direct quote but close. I guess that is how I feel about Daddy and me.

March 27, 2011

This past week has been busy but rewarding. I have missed my missionary buddy, Sharen. She is vacationing for three weeks in Arizona and it's been lonely without her. She is a great friend! I continue to learn my duties at the Center and I'm also learning that the more I know, the more I

know I don't know. There is so much that is coming about through the computer to assist genealogists but at times it is overwhelming. Just this past week we were notified of another site that is a repository of over a billion names! It isn't affiliated with the Church but still has been presented to us as one more resource at our disposal. I have spent several hours this week watching computer presentations of all kinds of genealogical classes in a variety of subjects from managing your records to beginning tips to finding answers in cemeteries. The list goes on and on and it is wonderful to be able to sit here in my computer room and have the classes come to me. I try to take good notes and select the classes that pertain to me right now and I can tell that I'm learning, but just not fast enough.

I have tried to identify why this missionary assignment has me overwhelmed. The people at the Center are kind and patient and I'm not having demands put on me that aren't within my abilities. I think it is because I have a closet full of family history memorabilia, scrapbooks, photo albums, and large binders full of information that have been collected and sacrificed over for several generations and I hardly know what to do with it all or where to start. I've tried to realize that I can only do what I can do but the sheer volume of records that I have is daunting. I've been trying to figure out just what should be my focus. I'm continuing to work on our family history book but where do I start with research? Do I include Daddy's lines or just my own? Daddy made a file years ago with both of our sides of the family and it goes back far enough that I am having a hard time know if the lines are on his side or mine. One of the instructors I listened to this week said that the advent of the computer has enabled us to make mistakes faster than was ever possible before. I have heard that from many of the other missionaries at the Center and they have cautioned me against adding to my lines without adequate sources and research. Anyway, as you can see, I'm still trying to decide just what I should be working on.

Following my temple assignment on Friday I drove to Rexburg and SaraKay and I attended "The Savior of the World" in the new I-Center. The production was wonderful and depicted the Savior's life. It was a unique portrayal and the narration was coupled with a large choir and orchestra as well as dancers. The auditorium was nearly filled to capacity and it was a thrill to be a part of it all. Of course, having a few hours with SaraKay was also a treat. She is under-the-gun right now with the pressures of upcoming vocal juries, finals, papers due, and other demands that always hit this time of the semester. The term will be over April 9th and the Collegiate Singers are leaving Sunday morning the 10th for their tour to the Midwest, most particularly Minnesota. This Tuesday they have a concert in Rexburg, on Thursday in Pocatello, and on Saturday afternoon they will be performing with several other choirs at the afternoon session of General Conference. It's all really great stuff but just a lot to do to be ready.

Saturday I spent part of the day outside working in the yard. It felt good to escape the confines of the house and catch a little sun. No matter how much I do in the fall, it always seems like spring brings with it a lot of clean-up and clearing away. Despite the inconsistencies in the weather, whenever I go outside, I am amazed at all the birds and their chatter and optimism. Last Friday when I drove to the temple in a huge snowstorm, I had to dispel the blues by saying, "Spring is coming, spring is coming." I called the manager of the lodge where we are going to have our reunion and asked if I could schedule a time to come look at the facilities and get a feel for the situation. She was very accommodating but said to call back in May. The snow is so deep right now that there is no way we could get into the lodge unless we brought along our own snowplow!

April 7, 2011

Sorry to be so late getting this letter out. The past few months I have written these letters on Sunday morning since our meetings don't start until 1:00. With last Sunday being conference, I got off schedule and totally forgot.

Last Saturday morning I traveled to Burley to spend the weekend with Mike and Marci and Tim who came from Boise to date a girl he met from Twin Falls. I listened to conference enroute and arrived before the morning session was over. What a beautiful session! Mike and Marci were not able to listen to the afternoon session due to his involvement with a wedding for a Hispanic couple. He performed the ceremony and then they were invited to the dinner afterward so they didn't arrive home until about 5:00. Tim and the girls and I all watched the afternoon session and kept especially alert during the BYU-I choir numbers. SaraKay was a part of the choir and so each time that they would sing I would sit on the floor by the TV and get ready to point her

out. After the first two songs were over and we hadn't seen her, we figured that we wouldn't get to, but, low and behold! on the last song the camera picked up her whole row of girls and there she was!

The last few days I have had numerous people tell me that they saw her. Elder Bennion saw her as did one of her friends, (Nate Jackson) who is serving a mission in South America. Also Linnea Hammond, Brenda Cox, Randy and Shauntel and family, Becky and kids, Tominagas, and others in the community. SaraKay is in the thick of finals and will have her juries tomorrow. She has really pushed to finish up and is trying to stay well despite the long hours and fatigue. She leaves Sunday morning for tour and is anxious for that.

Marci and Mike were gracious hosts, as usual. Marci had some children's conference packets that Amber and Ellie were working on as they sat listening to the sessions and they were so quiet and accommodating that we listened to all the sessions with hardly a glitch. Olivia just toddled around sitting on one lap and then another and was a delight. That's a lot of talks for small children to sit through and by the time Sunday afternoon arrived they were ready for a break. I left about two and caught the last session on my way home. Saturday night Mike and Tim attended priesthood session together and we carried on the tradition of pie when they arrived home. Mike also included a young man in the ward who attended with them and joined us afterward.

I spent Monday and Tuesday at the library and continue to learn. The missionaries who serve there are a very dedicated bunch. Each morning we have a devotional and many of the missionaries who are assigned talks will refer to their experiences and decision to give service. I am constantly amazed at the depth of their testimonies. At General Conference we marvel at the strength of those who lead us but that strength goes all the way down to the grass roots and it's inspiring to be surrounded by such devotion.

April 10, 2011

I have a few minutes before I need to leave for my meetings and thought I'd get this letter started. I've spent the morning trying to nap to make up for getting up at 4 a.m. to help SaraKay get back to Rexburg by 6:30 a.m. to leave on their Collegiate Choir tour. It was such a relief to get her on her way. She has had several very stressful weeks with finals, research papers, juries, clean checks and moving apartments, pre-tour performances, performances at General Conference as well as at BYU-I graduation yesterday. I've worried that she was going to have a meltdown before she finished up her classes and she came close.

Part of the problem was that she took too many credits to begin with and then found out two weeks ago that she was expected to jury on her voice. She had not understood that she needed to and thought that she had completed all her juries and just had to have her songs learned for her senior recital the end of June. Well, that changed everything for her because she has about eight numbers, most in German or Italian that needed to be memorized and ready for performance this week. Also adding to the stress level was that not only did the choir have its concert repertoire but they are giving several firesides to LDS youth groups and that involves several new songs, most of which Brother Kempton asked SaraKay to accompany. Then yesterday she was asked to arrange several things for daily devotionals and on and on. She was supposed to get home yesterday at 2:00 but was just leaving Rexburg then and it just pushed us to the limit to do everything that needed to be done for her to be ready for departure this morning. She still had one online final to take, three hours of private piano practicing to complete for her A in her private piano lessons, and two new songs Brother Kempton gave her to have ready for the fireside tonight. She was also given a song to arrange for piano and organ when the fellow who was going to perform it on the organ had to back out of going on the tour. We had shopping to do, hair to cut, clothes to wash, and other details that just take time. We finally made it to bed at about midnight after a teary time and then we were so hyper that neither of us could sleep. We were worried that we wouldn't hear the alarm or whatever and not make it to the bus on time.

About 1:30 I was still awake when all at once she sat up, got out of bed, and knelt down to pray. She always says her morning prayer the minute she gets up in the morning so I suspected that she was half asleep. When she got up, I asked her what she was doing and she said she needed to get ready to go. I told her it was only 1:30 am and to go back to bed. I dozed off and then heard her phone alarm go off at 3:00. I thought it was supposed to be set for four and

questioned her but she had some more computer work she needed to complete and knew she needed some more time. Well, as I'm sure you can see from this description, we pretty much didn't get any sleep and so when 5:30 arrived we had the car packed and left home right on schedule. She was still so wound up that she said she wasn't even tired but I know it will hit her later. Fortunately, they will have several hours of travel today before they attend sacrament meeting in Wyoming and then present a fireside for the youth in the Sheridan Stake. The bright side of this drama is that everything was planned down to the minute and all of her outfits were included in the price of the tour so they have to wear designated outfits each day and activity. That simplified her preparation considerably.

I came home from Rexburg and although my dining room is piled high with boxes and paraphernalia that we unloaded from her car, the stress is over and I can breathe again. This week with her gone I am having the '97 Buick gone through and new tires put on it so that it will be ready for Arizona in September. And that's another story but for now she's survived another semester without a nervous breakdown. Once she gets a few hours between her and last semester I'm sure that this tour will be a wonderful experience. President Clark met with the choir and other groups that were touring and encouraged them to think of this as a mini mission. They are performing at several venues as well as exchanges with other colleges. They will also perform at Carthage and get to do baptisms in the Winter Quarter's temple. I can't remember every place they will be but they will give firesides to youth groups all along the way and that should be fun for them, too.

Our weather this past week has been wet and cold and so I've spent most of the time indoors working on various projects. It seems like I never run out of things to do. Friday night I attended the high school choral departments' concert and thoroughly enjoyed it. As some of you know I am in a community choir that is helping with the Scarlett Pimpernel production this weekend. We don't have very much to do but it has been fun preparing for it and rubbing shoulders with friends who are participating. Last Wednesday I helped with Thelma Wolfley's funeral. Yesterday I got a call that Lynn (Thelma's husband) passed away. He was doing so poorly on Wednesday that although the family brought him in a wheelchair for the funeral, something went wrong and they took him out just 10 minutes into the service. He looked so frail and thin. They are real stalwarts of this community.

P.S. I just got a very sweet letter from Jared telling me about him and Rachel bearing their testimonies in sacrament meeting. He knew that he was being prompted by the Holy Ghost and also knew that Grandpa Steve would be proud of him for doing it. He and Bonnie had been working on his Faith in God award and had visited about the promptings of the Spirit. Because of this he was able to recognize the promptings. He also bore witness that he knew that if we live worthy, we can also be together someday as an eternal family. It's a sweet picture to visualize you parents working one-on-one with your children on their Primary and YM and YW awards. I think some of the most powerful teaching in the Church is done within the walls of our own homes. Thanks for sharing, Jared.

April 17, 2011

This past week was full of satisfying activities. Last January the community was invited to participate in presenting a musical rendition of the "Scarlet Pimpernel." I previously participated when the Snake River Orchestra presented the Messiah and thoroughly enjoyed the interaction with the other participants as well as the opportunity to sing in a choir. When I heard about this performance, I jumped at the chance to be a part of it. With Daddy and SaraKay being so much a part of the orchestra for so many years and because of my friendship with Linnea, I relish the chance to rub shoulders in that group. Well, we have been practicing every Wednesday since January and our performances were Friday and Saturday nights. As it turned out I was one of four altos in a women's section of eight singers. The music was fairly challenging but beautiful and the soloists, John Grayson, Sarah Jackson, and Curtis VanOrden, were absolutely spectacular! We had dress rehearsals on Wednesday and Thursday and then the two performances. I just loved the chance to do this! Afterward we stood in a receiving line in the commons area at the high school and greeted members of the audience. What fun!

Carolyn Crawford and I sat on chairs on the left of the risers and right next to the big kettle drums. It was quite an education to watch the drummer play as well as to watch him fine tune after each song. He had a small rectangular instrument that he held closely over the drum and lightly tapped

with his finger or mallet and that registered if the drum was in tune. He played with such concentration and precision. We did have one funny moment on Friday night when Linnea signaled for the drummer to start the song and it so startled Carolyn that she about jumped right out of her chair. Luckily, we were seated back behind the orchestra and not visible to the audience. We started laughing (quietly of course) and the next night the drummer moved that drum to the center position so as not to blow Carolyn out of her seat again! It was fun to be sitting in the midst of the French horns, the trumpets and just enjoy the music and watch the musicians. Each time we sang we got on risers and were visible but most of the time we were at the back of the stage and free to just sit and immerse ourselves in the beautiful music and the thrill of being a part of the event. Some of the audience members mentioned that I was carrying on the Larsen tradition of being a part of the Snake River Orchestra.

My assignment in the temple this rotation is to help with the brides and we had three that we helped on Friday. Working with the brides also means that we are working with grandmas and mothers and sometimes it gets very interesting. We deal with all kinds of situations and try to be kind and gracious despite having to correct them or hold the line as far as what is or isn't acceptable during the marriage ceremony. The temple presidency make the whole experience as wonderful for the family as they possibly can and yet still maintain the spirit and sacredness of the ordinance. This assignment has really been enjoyable partly because we get to introduce the "own endowment" sister to the temple ordinance for the first time and see the joy that she feels as she enters into these covenants.
All of the brides on Friday had very elaborate dresses and we ran into a major problem when one of the brides and her mother put the train of the dress up into a bustle and discovered to their horror that during the photo shoot the night before on the banks of the Snake River, the dress had become stained underneath by goose droppings. Since everything has to be white, inside and out, we got some cleaner from the temple laundry and the mother and attendant were on their hands and knees in the bride's room scrubbing off the stains. Although they worked feverishly the wedding was delayed in order to have the dress presentable and white. Weddings are so stressful and we feel the apprehension of the mothers and brides as they come bustling in with all their clothing bags, make-up, curling irons, shoes, and everything else. After the ceremony they come back to the bride's area and they are all smiles! It is such a wonderful thing and so joyous!

My time at the Center is enjoyable. I work Monday and Tuesday. Some authorities from Salt Lake were meeting with our directors Tuesday night and we heard, via the grapevine that some changes were coming. It has been interesting to watch the "politics" and personalities at the Center and to realize that wherever you have life, you have politics. How grateful I am that we are led by inspired leaders and that I can fall into line and not concern myself with all of that. It is a very comfortable feeling and allows me to just do my job and not worry about anything else. And I am gradually learning what I need to know. I have taken some of the classes three times and finally I am beginning to get the hang of it. I gave a devotional last week prior to our shift and talked about personal histories and showed the Pakistan book and the Larsen Legacy book. They have asked me to present some of it again this Tuesday during another meeting.

Although I haven't heard from SaraKay much this past week, her few calls have been reassuring. She is having a wonderful experience and seeing and doing some things that she will remember for a lifetime. The choir was invited to sing at a Mass as well as to perform in a large, ornate basilica. SaraKay said that she had never seen such an exquisite building and the acoustics were unbelievable! One of the numbers they performed was composed to be sung in a large cathedral and it was written to account for the 7 second delay that has to be factored into everything when singing in such a massive edifice. That song was so beautiful when performed in the venue it was written for. She has visited several college campuses, performed at firesides, attended early morning seminary, stayed in homes of members and nonmembers alike, and had exchanges with high school and college choirs. This week they will head home, performing at Nauvoo and Carthage as well as at other colleges and also attend a baptismal session at the Winter Quarters Temple. I'm sure that she will have lots of stories to tell when she gets home.

She will arrive in Rexburg about 1:00 a.m. Sunday morning so I will get her early that morning, bring her home to attend conference with me and then pack up her car, celebrate Easter briefly, and then

head back to Rexburg for the new semester. I've been able to get her car tuned up, brakes fixed, tires replaced, and hopefully secure it for now and when she uses it in Arizona.

The weather here has been cold and contrary but I've spent a little time in the yard and things are greening up. FYI: I will be spending Mother's Day weekend with Steve and Bonnie, Laurel's graduation weekend with the Larsens of Boise, the weekend of June 4th with Bennions, and the 6th of June I will fly to Chandler while Becky and Maddie attend Girls Camp.

April 27, 2011

Happy Easter! What a beautiful day, complete with SaraKay getting home from tour, stake conference with a General Authority, and Mike and Marci and bunch joining us for dinner! Besides that, the weather was warm and wonderful and I was able to get some yard work done yesterday and I feel ready to get into a new week. It was a treat to have Mike and Marci and family here if only for a few hours. When I went to the door, they were all standing on the front step and it looked like a perfect shot for a photo. They had come directly from stake conference and were all dressed in their Easter Sunday duds and looked beautiful. I thought about how often I sit in my Sunday meetings and see the young families come in all spiffed up and I look at them with love and admiration for their goodness and efforts to raise their families in the gospel. And then I think that all over the world my kids are all dressed up on Sundays and attending Church and maybe the old folks in their wards are looking at them and admiring them for their goodness! Anyway, it was a sweet sight and filled me with gratitude and joy!

Our stake conference was beautiful! So many sweet testimonies of the Savior and inspiring talks on a variety of gospel subjects as well as the three-ward choir that sang one of my favorite songs, "Draw Near unto Me." I invited some other widows to come with me for the Saturday night session as well as for today and enjoyed associating with all the good people of this stake. I'm so grateful for the gospel in my life!

For Christmas Stephani and Linds gave me "To the Rescue" about President Monson. It has taken me a while to get through it. It has been full of a lot of modern church history and the development of programs such as the Church Welfare Program and others. I haven't enjoyed it as much as I did some biographies of other presidents but I finally realized that it is because it has more information regarding the history of the Church than the other biographies. I don't know how Heidi Swinton ever got all of those sources put into a workable format but she did and I'm grateful for her. I have been inspired by the amount of charitable deeds President Monson has done and have asked myself if I am in tune with the needs of those around me and as willing to respond to the Spirit. I have been trying harder to listen to the Spirit. I so appreciate the friendship and concern that President Monson extends to everyone he meets. What a great example of Christian living!

I have been able to do a little yard work this past week and feel like I'm getting a handle on it. The forecast is for sunny weather this weekend. I hired Mike Fresh to mow for me and I'm going to see how I get along with it. I'm also trying to arrange the irrigating so that the Hanni might be able to handle that for me. I'm moving ahead with mission plans. There is still a lot of details about SaraKay's student teaching assignment that need to be worked through so we're taking it a step at a time.

She had a wonderful experience on her tour across America. They were gone for 14 days and had 35+ gigs! These included youth firesides, early morning Seminary appearances, temple baptisms and endowments in the Winter Quarters Temple, singing to the missionaries in the Nauvoo and Winter Quarters missions, LDS Youth Conferences as well as exchanges with colleges and teaching opportunities at various high school music classes. SaraKay was thrilled with the chance to spread the gospel in song and to interact with youth who live in the mission field and long for interaction with other LDS youth. It was truly the highlight of her college years and even eclipsed the wonderful times she had singing with Chamber Singers in high school. This semester she will be accompanying the University Chorale for Brother Kempton and she is excited to watch Brother Kempton work with non-music majors which more closely approximates what she will be doing in her teaching opportunities.

I thought I would mention an experience I had at the FH Center this week. Several weeks ago I was trying to figure out just what direction I should go in my personal history pursuits. I decided that I wouldn't just research my own lines but that I would go backward and take loose ends on any line whether it be the Larsen or the Richards. I started on a Larsen line and began collecting group sheets and looking for loose ends to research. It became quickly obvious that the

Larsen lines go "across the pond" (as the experienced researchers call the ocean) and that I would be in Scandinavia for that research. After working on it for a few weeks I could see how difficult it was and so I counseled with some of the more experienced missionaries and they counseled me to focus first on American research since that is the area most of our patrons are interested in and then to seek out opportunities to learn about research in Scandinavia since it is some of the most difficult to do.

So I returned to a loose end on Grandma Ilene's side and came across a family in the early 1800's that sounded like my family. I tried unsuccessfully for several hours to hunt in US Census's. Finally I asked my friend, Janette, if she could help me and she sat down, googled "Colville Abercrombie" and within minutes printed out eight pages of Land deeds, wills, census results, and other references to that family! I was overjoyed and have been filling out group sheets and trying to put together families that go back into the 1600's. It has been so exciting and will enable me to get some names ready for the temple. I still have a long way to go but I have several leads on spouses, etc. and have marveled at all the names that are a part of South Carolina's early settlement. I recognize many of the marriage names as neighbors of the Abercrombies and I think I may have tapped into some wonderful opportunities. Anyway, it's exciting and all made possible by the wonder of the internet. I can't believe all the things that are being made available. We were made aware of Google Books which has digitized thousands of antique books that have information on the early American settlers and these have been made available to the world absolutely free! People across the world are preparing records and other web sites are continuing to expand their collections. It's so exciting to be a part of this work!

May 1, 2011

It's a perfect Sabbath spring morning. The sky is blue and cloudless and the sun is spreading warmth and good cheer. I can hear Brent Young mowing his lawn but for the most part the neighborhood is quiet. My life is so absorbed right now with church related activities that sometimes the days all run together. I am enjoying my time at the Center and I continue to learn and understand more all the time. I'm feeling more at ease with the other missionaries and I have a whole new group of friends. The temple continues to bring me peace and comfort. All last week I could tell that my emotions were close to the surface. Easter always does that to me but how grateful I am for the gospel and the bright hope it gives of a glorious resurrection and reunion with loved ones.

This past week was the first time that I had Mike Fresh mow my lawn. It had been so rainy and cold that his crew didn't come on Thursday like he said they would and the grass was getting long and looking shaggy. It was all that I could do to not get on my mower and go to work but I knew my helper from last year was involved in baseball games and that I would be doing it all myself and so I held out and waited. When I returned home on Friday night after the temple the yard had been transformed! They really did a great job including those pesky bushes along the driveway. My grass catcher hasn't worked for years and so every time I mowed, I would have to do some raking and it was nice to see the lawn mowed and the loose grass gone. I spent yesterday morning spraying for weeds along the front of the yard and on the sides of the driveway and then raked and piled all the branches in the pasture that had fallen into my irrigation ditch during the windy days. I I continue to work on the second volume of Larsen Legacy but also spend hours on the research I mentioned in last week's letter. The new FamilySearch website is a godsend but also full of a conglomeration of all the records that have been submitted by people throughout the world and sometimes the information is all tangled together and far from accurate. That is what I was working through yesterday since there are multiple parents and combined siblings and so many duplicates, etc. I am enjoying the hunt but am amazed at the time it takes. How would anyone do this work if they didn't have the freedom from regular demands. Being a widow isn't ideal but it does present me with a situation that gives me a great deal of discretionary time. The challenge is for me to use that gift of time wisely in furthering the work of the Lord. Hopefully I am doing that.

SaraKay is back in school and on the final semester at BYU-I. FYI: Her senior recital is on Saturday, July 9th (her birthday) in the Snow Building on campus. She was assigned the date by the music department and she knows it is a busy, busy time for everyone and she isn't expecting a crowd although she would be so pleased if anyone could come. She will be performing several piano numbers as well as vocal pieces. Her graduation in on July 16th I

think but if anyone can come for anything I think the senior recital would be her first choice.

I will be leaving Friday for Wellsville to spend the weekend with Steve and Bonnie and family. As a part of our weekend, we will visit the lodge at Bear Lake and get a feel for what the accommodations are like for the reunion. Then we will begin to plan. I will return Sunday late afternoon so maybe the best choice would be to let me call each of you for Mother's Day enroute home and we could visit then. I don't want to miss my Mother's Day calls!

I have been grieved by the recent events of the tornadoes in the South. The devastation is unbelievable! I have asked myself what it would be like to have everything you own swept away. I take such comfort in my surroundings here in my home. It is a refuge for me and keeps Daddy's memory so alive. To have it all gone would be physically and emotionally devastating. My heart aches for those who are affected and I have tried to be generous with my fast offerings, trusting that the Church is aware and on site to give aid. The world is in turmoil and it never ceases to amaze me when yet another disaster strikes, turning people's lives on end.

I spent part of Friday night watching Prince William and commoner Kate Middleton exchange vows in their highly publicized wedding. The world loves its celebrities. Hopefully this marriage which has started with such a flair will be a solid one and set a good example for the three billion people who watched in on TV!

May 12, 2011

The time is flying by and soon I'll be going to Boise for Laurel's graduation and festivities there. I got her graduation announcement in the mail yesterday and couldn't help thinking, "Sunrise, Sunset. Congratulations, Laurel! You are a beautiful graduate!

My weekend in Wellsville was wonderful. Following my temple assignment on Friday I left and arrived at Steve and Bonnie's about 8:30 that evening. Anne Marie was gone to a friend's house for the evening and Nate and Rachel were at the Bear Lake scout camp for a weekend of work and training in preparation for their jobs this summer. Rachel will be helping in the kitchen for the 10-week session and Nate will have other responsibilities around camp. Shortly after I arrived Steve introduced me to ancestry.com, a genealogy program that he and Nate have been using to track and identify ancestors. He recently ordered a subscription for it that will enable our entire family to access our family tree and keep touch with each other regarding research on the various lines. It is a program that we have at the Center but since it is a paid subscription, I don't have it on my own computer. Steve felt that it would enhance our family's ability to work as a team on the research we need to do. One wonderful feature of ancestry.com is that it gives you research tips whereas normally a person just tries to come up with possible places that need to be searched and depending on your experience and abilities, you may not even consider some of the sources that this software suggests. I loved having that personal tutorial from Steve and am anxious to get into the program and see what I can do.

Saturday morning Jared, Chrissy, Stephani, Steve and I met in Logan and traveled together to the lodge in Bear Lake that I rented for our upcoming reunion. I have been in touch with the owner and had arranged in advance for a chance to see the facilities so that we can get into the planning of this reunion. I had Googled the address and had the phone information on a piece of paper that I inadvertently left on my desk at home. When I discovered my error, I didn't know how we were going to notify the owner that we were enroute since originally, I told her that we would call her as we left Logan so that she would have a feel when to meet us. Well, we arrived in Garden City at the appointed hour and drove down main street looking for some clue as to where the realtor's office was since JoAnn (my contact person) had said to come to the intersection out of Logan canyon, turn left and the office was on that main street. Well, that described several possible offices and we weren't sure which one was the right one so we pulled into a service station and went into the convenience store and asked around. All I had was the name JoAnn. It just so happened that there was a man in the store at the same time who knew JoAnn and told us where her office was. It was such a fluke that he just happened to be in the store as I was inquiring with the clerk and overheard us and was able to offer assistance. Oh, the joys of small towns! We drove right to the office and were only a few minutes late despite the problems we encountered.

JoAnn guided us to the lodge and showed us through the facilities. It was nice to have Steve and Stephani along and talk through the situation and where and what we would do. After JoAnn left, we took our time walking around the yard and

eventually drove to the public North Beach which was about a 10 minute drive away. We continued back to Garden City and enjoyed a nice lunch together at a Mexican restaurant as well as dropping in on Rachel and Nate at scout camp and visiting with them for a short time. As we entered the camp ground there were crews of young men and women clearing off walkways, cutting down trees, and sprucing up the camp. It put me in mind of the many years we were involved in that process with Daddy.

We headed home about 1:30 and enjoyed the scenic trip down Logan Canyon. There is still a lot of snow to melt and already the river is nearing flood stage. I guess Utah and Idaho are dealing with the same problems of flooding and runoff from the high snow pack of last winter. Our own Snake River here is running high and fast and being watched carefully. It seems like just a few years ago that we were suffering a severe drought and there was a question as to whether there would be enough water to finish out the growing season. And now here we are with the opposite problem.

After dropping Stephani off at her car, we went shopping for a few Mother's Day things and then Steve took me to his office at iFrogz and we worked together to scan in the family letters from '93-96. Although I haven't even finished up this latest book ('84-91), Steve has been scanning these letters for me at his office and it is saving me so much time and effort to have them done on a commercial scanner. Steve has software on his computer that transcribes them into editable documents so that I can work with them. He puts them on Dropbox for me and I work on them "on the cloud" and they are automatically saved for me, too. He has so much savvy when it comes to the latest and greatest computer stuff and he is invaluable to me as he shares his expertise and makes my projects more do-able.

Saturday evening Steve, Bonnie and the kids and I spent some time in their yard cleaning out the raspberry patch and spreading Caseron around the base of their fruit trees. It was fun to get to visit and we worked and enjoyed the beautiful spring weather. Although the weather forecast was for rain, it didn't arrive until Sunday and we were able to work in the yard for several hours. Later I enjoyed hearing Rachel sing through her vocal numbers and Chrissy played her recital numbers for me on the piano. They are both doing very well with their lessons.

Sunday I attended meetings with their family and was impressed with the sacrament meeting program as well as with the lessons in Sunday School and Relief Society. They have a great ward and some very solid members. What a treat to see the love and admiration the people of the ward have for them and their family! Later we enjoyed a delicious Mother's Day dinner and then I left for home, arriving about 5:00. For the rest of the evening, I had an opportunity to visit with everyone on the phone. By the time I was ready for bed I felt like I had enjoyed a feast of love from all of you children!

May 15, 2011

It doesn't seem possible that May is half way over! The time is flying by and July and reunion time will soon be upon us. I think summer has finally arrived complete with shirt sleeve weather, trees leafing out, and tulips ablaze with color. This time of year, the grounds of the Idaho Falls Temple are a patchwork of tulips and other decorative plants and even though the extensive grounds remodeling has taken over the south side, the north end has been left untouched so that the brides will have some good places for photo shoots. And we do have lots of beautiful brides and handsome grooms coming to the temple for weddings these days.

For the months of April, May, and June I have the assignment to work in the "own endowment" area which involves the own endowment patrons, sealings, and weddings. Anyone coming for the first time will come to our area and we introduce them to the endowment and also help the bride before she goes for her wedding ceremony. It is a joyous, stressful time for the bride and her mother and most of them arrive loaded down with elaborate dresses, veils, floral arrangements, and other attire. These days many of the brides choose to get married in their own temple dresses and then they come back to the bride's room to don their fancy wedding dresses, veils, and wildly colored tennis shoes or cowboy boots (yes, you read that right!) to go out for pictures on the temple grounds.

Sometimes the young women going through for the first time will be leaving on missions or will have reached an age when they just feel like they want to receive their endowments. We also have quite a few previously married women who are returning with their husbands and sometimes, children, to be sealed. These occasions are always joyous and often teary for everyone who

has been influential in helping the couple "come back." Last Friday we had an equally joyous occasion but one that was out of the ordinary. When the sister arrived at the temple, we were pleasantly surprised to see that this "bride" was about 70 years old! She was a "Southern belle" originally from South Carolina and had met her husband while he was stationed there in the military. They had lived a lifetime together and had just now made the decision to come to the House of the Lord to be sealed. As the day unfolded, including the endowment session, the sealing of husband and wife, the sealing of the husband and his siblings to their deceased parents, and the sealing of two deceased children to the couple, we learned some of the details of their lives and sorrows. Although the couple had five children, only the two deceased ones were able to be sealed. The other three (over 18 years of age) didn't qualify. We learned that the two deceased children were two boys ages six and seven who died years before of suffocation after locking themselves in an old refrigerator. It is difficult to imagine bearing a sorrow like that but on Friday these two little boys were finally sealed to their parents and there was joy on both sides of the veil for that sweet family!

The longer I work in the temple the more I believe that "all roads (in the life of an LDS family) lead to the temple." Whether it is the beginning of an eternal family, the joining of an existing family eternally, endowing the rising generation for the challenges of life, or the strengthening of the members as they face the challenges of everyday living, the temple is at the center. How grateful I am to walk those halls each week and know that I can claim the blessings and be strengthened.

Yesterday I got up at 3:30 and left for the temple at 4:30 to help with a special session for the Relief Society sisters in the Shelley Stake. About ten o'clock I finished up and drove to Rexburg to spend part of the day with SaraKay. She is into the thick of her last semester on campus and the pressure is on. She is enjoying her classes and especially likes her education classes where she is learning teaching fundamentals and practices. She is feeling a bit melancholy about leaving the whole college scene but is also excited with the prospects of student teaching. She has been dating a fellow who wants to "take their relationship to a new level" and she has really been wrestling with that issue and can think of little else. Of course, having never spent any time with him myself, my feelings are merely a reflection of her musings to me over the last several months and I was able to offer little in the advice area. We are both praying for inspiration and she regularly attends the Rexburg Temple and is trying to get answers for this weightiest of decisions. I am so glad that I'm not 20 again and having to figure out my life! Sometimes it isn't fun getting old but sometimes it is rather comfortable and comforting to know that those kinds of choices are over. Pray for SaraKay.

And while you are praying for the Larsen side of the family, add Tim. His back continues to be an issue and although he has had months of physical therapy and chiropractic treatments, the problem persists. There are some medical treatments that have been suggested to him but if the problem can be solved without the more evasive procedures, that is the ideal. Thankfully he is able to carry on with most things including his tennis activities and the coming of summer has given him a chance to get outside and get in some lessons. He spent part of yesterday playing tennis and part doing yard work. When I go to Boise in two weeks I am excited to get to see the kitchen remodel and the new carpet that he had installed.

I'm looking forward to spending time celebrating Laurel's graduation and being a part of the festivities there. Of course, when you have seven children under one roof, ages 1 to 18, there is always a party going on somewhere! Love to all. Mom

P.S. I just finished reading Elder Russell M. Nelson's conference talk in the Conference Edition of the Ensign entitled "Face the Future with Faith." He quotes D&C section 98: *"Your prayers have entered into the ears of the Lord....and are recorded with this seal and testament--the Lord hath sworn and decreed that they shall be granted. Therefore, he giveth this promise unto you, with an immutable covenant that they shall be fulfilled; and all things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good, and to my names' glory, saith the Lord."* Wonderful words of encouragement for all of us as we meet our daily challenges!

May 22, 2011

Last week one of my dear friends and ward member, Vonda Fisher, passed away. She had been feeling kind of punk and went to the doctor and received the news that she had cancer. It was in her lungs and they suspected that it had spread from there. She chose to try radiation

treatments but she went downhill so fast from there that she died within a couple of weeks of starting her treatments. It confirmed to me that Daddy made the right choice when he chose not to have treatments. In Vonda's compromised condition the radiation was too much for her and it burned her esophagus and she was in extreme pain and unable to eat. She was finally given morphine and slipped into a coma and died a few days later. It sounded like what we experienced with Daddy only he didn't have to go through the pain of the radiation. Cancer is such a terrible disease. It's been so hard on the family, especially on her husband, John, who has been suffering for almost three years with a severe case of shingles and in a lot of pain himself.

Vonda and John have been so involved with their daughter Sue's family over the years and living next door they have been so much a part of their lives. It has been hard on the Fife children and I know it will be a huge loss to them all. Just about a month ago our ward lost Thelma and Lynn Wolfley and now to have Vonda gone really hits us hard. It seems like just a few weeks ago she was healthy and vital and involved in the ward. She'll be missed.

My week was busy with temple and Center responsibilities. I hit a low on Tuesday when I was trying to do some personal research and just couldn't seem to locate the people and places that I was looking for. After a thoroughly frustrating day I felt ready to "throw in the towel." For several days thereafter I wrestled with my feelings and finally I decided that maybe I should focus less on my own research and more on becoming proficient with the general research aids and programs. I think specific research gives a person a feel for that area but in my role as a missionary I am needing to have at my disposal information that is more general and so I am going to focus my efforts on studying the various helps that we are being taught in our classes. I am so worried about the day that I am assigned to help a patron and worried that I won't be able to do it effectively. There is a lot of genealogical information out there that is faulty and I don't want to add to the problem by my lack of abilities. I guess I need to be cautious but not let my fear paralyze me.

I've visited with several of you this past week and everyone seems to be busy finishing up the school year. I will leave Wednesday afternoon for Burley and then continue on to Boise Thursday and spend the weekend with Dave and Andrea and family for Laurel's graduation and also get to attend when Anna gets her patriarchal blessing. I'm so excited to be a part of their family's activities especially these very momentous occasions. Andrea also suggested that we find time to put in some flowers and work in the yard. That sounds like fun! I also am planning to visit Tim and see his remodeling projects and catch up on his activities. I was hoping to watch one of his tennis games but we'll see how the schedule goes and decide that when I get there.

I will return Sunday afternoon and as plans now are, Steph and family and Mike and Marci, Katie from Yellowstone and SaraKay will join me Sunday evening here and we will visit the cemetery that evening or the next day. I went to the cemetery yesterday and tried to clean up Grandpa and Grandma Larsen's and Daddy's headstones. While I was there Gary Farmer was there doing some work and he visited with me about the toll the hard irrigation water takes on the headstones. I bought some special solution from the American Monument company last week that was supposed to clean off the calcium deposits but I couldn't see that it had made any difference at all. I guess we just have to live with it. Anyway, going to the cemetery gave me a few minutes alone to think back on the last two years and our time without Daddy. It still seems unreal at times, but thank goodness we have the bright hope of a glorious reuniting in the years ahead. Before I put in my shift at the temple on Saturday, I was able to decorate Grandma Gooch's grave in the Idaho Falls cemetery and that was a sweet experience, too. I wish my own parents were buried closer so that I could visit their graves more often but I have to rely on Kathy and Deniece to do that.

I've appreciated getting Sam's missionary letters, blogs from China, monthly updates from several households and reading "Anecdote of Note" from traveling Kate who is presently working at Mammoth Falls in Yellowstone Park. She fills her blogs with lots of interesting experiences as well as local history and I'm learning a lot and enjoying her writing style. I recommend them to everyone.

June 2, 2011

Last week was a whirlwind, but a thoroughly enjoyable one. Thursday morning I left for Boise after having my car lubed and a front tire worked on. That tire has been a source of consternation for several months and by Wednesday it was looking low again. It is on warranty so I took it to

Countryside Tire and they really worked it over. Although I have a AAA Auto membership, I still hate the thought of being stranded on the interstate with a flat.

My trip to Boise was uneventful. I arrived about one that afternoon and had a few hours with David and Andrea before the kids returned from school. Of course, little Nathan and Islay were home and it was a treat to have some time getting reacquainted with them. Islay is on the verge of walking and is such a cute little mite of a girl but she really holds her own. David has been working his HP job from a home office much of the time and it was fun to have him more a part of things. Laurel was in and out, finishing up things for the graduation that evening.

I mentioned last week that one of Andrea's dear friends passed away from cancer. She had struggled with it for several years but had carried on and did the best she could with the situation. She left a husband and two daughters, age 11 and 15. The funeral was on Friday. Andrea, Anna, and Laurel were involved with musical numbers and David was one of the speakers. I was grateful to be there to help with the little ones on Friday so that the rest of the family could be to the funeral and take care of their responsibilities. The whole week had been extremely busy and funeral preparations added to the load, so I was happy to add another pair of helping hands.

Thursday night Andrea arranged for a sitter for the three youngest and Anna, Chantelle, and Joseph went with us to graduation. It was held in the Taco Bell Arena on the BSU campus. There were over 350 students graduating and the program was a wonderful combination of short speeches and musical numbers. Boise High School is in the top 2% academically of all high schools nationally. Just to give you an idea of the credentials of the students, Laurel had a 4.1+GPA and she was ranked about 50th in the class! They boasted 10 National Merit Scholars, an amazing feat in view of the fact that there are only about 500 Merit scholarships given nation-wide. I couldn't help noticing the diversity in the student body as the diplomas were given out. There is only a small percentage of the students that are LDS so Laurel and Anna have lots of opportunities to mix and mingle with a wide variety of kids.

I love graduations! They are always so festive with family and friends celebrating and everyone smiling! This one was no different. After the ceremony we congregated out on a patio and thoroughly enjoyed meeting Laurel and her many classmates. She looked so beautiful and it was obvious that she has some wonderful friends and teachers who value and admire her for the lovely girl that she is! We took lots of pictures and enjoyed being a part of the celebration! Probably the only down side of the event was that it was cold and blustery but that didn't seem to dampen the spirits of the graduates and their admirers!

Several of you have asked regarding Laurel's plans for college. She will be starting at BYU-Provo in August and is taking generals for now until she decides which direction to go with her schooling. She is a very young graduate. She will turn 18 in October so she is hoping to get her degree from the "Y" before serving a mission. Congratulations, Laurel, and we wish you well in the years ahead.

On Friday morning everyone was up early and preparing for the funeral. Even Laurel who had been at the senior all-night party was cheerful about taking care of her duties that day. I stayed with McKay, Nathan, and Islay and kept things running at home. McKay caught a noon kindergarten bus; Islay took a nap and that left just Nathan and I to play together and read some books. He is such a delightful little boy and will sit for hours wrapped in someone's arms reading a book. The family arrived home early afternoon and everyone was pretty worn out and somber from the morning's activities. We just sat and visited and then made plans for the rest of the weekend.

I arranged with Tim for us to attend one of his tennis games Friday night, so after a quick supper Dave and Andrea and I drove to a local tennis club and watched Tim compete in the Boise Gatorade Tournament. He has been a part of a tennis club for the past couple of years and has been coached by a fellow who is older but very capable. Due to the rainy and cold weather, we watched the game from an indoor observation deck above the three courts and had a great view of Tim's match. When it started off and he made some errors, I worried that he would regret having us there. But as the matches progressed, he started gaining the upper hand and eventually won the sets. His competitor was 50ish and a strong and talented athlete.

When the game was over and we visited with Tim about it he commented that his opponent was a little surprised that he got beat. Tim told him that

he had studied his opponent's stats and strengths and weaknesses that were posted on some web site and done his homework to know what he would be facing. The other fellow was very kind and gracious throughout the match and impressed with Tim's game.

Following this we went to Tim's house to see his improvements. The last few months he has refinished his cabinets, had granite counter tops put in his kitchen and bathrooms, and has totally re-carpeted the home on both levels. It looks so nice! It was fun to see the pictures he bought in China framed and displayed in his home. It was also good to see that one of his roommates had planted a small garden in a strip along the back fence line. Andrea commented that they would have an overabundance of tomatoes if all the plants produced like hers normally do.

Dave and Andrea invited him to join us on Saturday for a barbecue. When we returned home Anna had put all the kids to bed, cleaned up supper, and had things well in hand. She is such a capable young woman and so willing to be of service. I might mention that she is working on her third Young Woman medallion, her main goal this time around being a mentor to a couple of Beehives in the ward who are just starting to work on theirs.

Saturday morning dawned cold and rainy so we changed our plans for a barbecue and fried the hamburgers inside on the range. When Tim arrived he informed us that he had just won his tennis match and was continuing on in the tournament. He also brought some smiles when he arrived with an enormous ice cream cake for the graduate that we all enjoyed following lunch. The rest of the afternoon we visited, read stories to the kids, and David and Joseph worked on some of the lawn jobs that Joseph is doing this summer. He also mowed their own lawn and had things looking really nice despite the problems of dealing with rain and wind.

That evening we started our fast for Anna's patriarchal blessing which was scheduled for Sunday morning. Later we had a chance to visit with her about blessings and it was sweet to have that interaction with her. On Sunday morning we went to her stake patriarch's home and she received a beautiful blessing. It was such a treat for me to get to be a part of that event. Following the blessing Sister Christensen, the patriarch's wife, commented on what an exemplary father David was and we told her that he was an identical twin. She said, "Well, that is wonderful news. I've always thought someone should clone David and now I find out that there are two of him!"

When I arrived home there were extra cars in the driveway but the house seemed deserted and it took me a minute to find everyone...in the computer room watching Josh's Ultimate Frisbee videos! Mike and SaraKay now have another family member who loves Frisbee! Just a while before I arrived home, Steph and Linds, Chris and Josh came from Logan, Katie from Yellowstone, and SaraKay from Rexburg. It was so fun to have everyone gather for Memorial Day and we had supper and were ready to leave for the cemetery when Mike and Marci and their three girls arrived from Burley.

The day had been cold and stormy so we tried to find a window of sunshine when we could go to the cemetery, but about the time we arrived it started to rain again. Well, we are a tough bunch and we had umbrellas so we braved the weather but within a few minutes it was pouring so bad that we had to make a hasty retreat to our cars. I felt badly that we couldn't linger just a while longer. Katie was in China when Dad passed away and this was the first time that she had been to the cemetery so I was disappointed that the weather hampered our plans. It looked like some other family members had already made some visits to decorate both Grandpa and Grandma Larsen's and Dad's graves and I appreciated that.

That evening we visited and then on Monday morning Linds, Josh, and Mike did some yard work for me. They cleaned out the rain gutters that were full of last fall's leaves and small branches as well as washed them clean from the dirt and grime of the past year. That was my main concern but they continued on and pulled weeds around the foundation of the house, in my flower bed, and under the front pines and also cleaned off the patio and serviced my mowers. I so appreciated them. It was such a cold miserable day but they braved the weather and really helped out.
On Monday about one I received a phone call from Tim. He had just completed his last match of the tournament and said, "Well, Mom, I just became the 3.5 champion of the Boise Gatorade Tournament! He had beaten his final opponent and won the tournament. He said that when he made his New Year's resolutions for 2011, he set a goal to win a tennis tournament and now that goal had been met. I was so happy that we were

able to support him and watch him play. He has always been a great athlete and enjoyed sports! I guess we should thank David who first introduced him to the game when Tim moved to Boise. It's turned out to be one of the things that Tim has really loved!

After lunch Steph and Linds left for Logan, Katie took SaraKay out to get some photos for graduation, and Mike and Marci and I continued with our visiting. Kate and SaraKay left soon thereafter and the Larsens of Burley had a quick supper with me and helped me put the house back in order before leaving for home. I felt like I had been in the midst of a whirlwind by the time Monday night arrived but it was very satisfying for me to have so much family around. A big thanks to all for your efforts to be here. And a huge thanks to Dave and Andrea for hosting me for their special weekend.

Tomorrow I will be at the temple. SaraKay and I are leaving tomorrow evening for Logan and will be there with the Bennions until evening when we are going to Kaysville to Deniece's and then to Karen's while Steph and Linds attend a soccer match and Josh goes to "Les Misérables" in Salt Lake. Sunday we will drive home and attend our meetings here. Monday I will work at the FH Center until I fly out for Phoenix and help Becky while she goes to Girl's Camp with her ward YW. I will return the following Monday and drive to Island Park to attend a campfire at Cedar Badge where they are honoring Dad. I probably won't get home until very late Monday night. I will pick up SaraKay in Rexburg and she will go with me to the camp. Tuesday I will have FH Center but come Wednesday my life will settle a little until reunion time.

I am meeting with Bishop Adams Sunday and getting mission papers started. SaraKay started hers last week so hopefully we can submit them together. Life is good.

June 5, 2011

I've spent a fun weekend in Utah visiting family and enjoying the wonderful spring sunshine. Following my temple assignment on Friday I arrived home and had a quick supper with SaraKay who had arrived a while earlier from Rexburg. She and I then traveled to Hyde Park to spend the weekend with Steph and Linds.

The trip to Logan was absolutely beautiful! The rain of the previous weeks had greened the mountains and valleys and even the lavas and sagebrush had a hue that was truly charming. Both SaraKay and I kept oohing and ahhing as another vista would come into view. We visited non-stop about SaraKay's classes this semester and especially about her music literature class and the different composers and their messages and lives. She is loving her opportunities but is a bit nostalgic about her upcoming graduation and departure from a campus that she has long claimed is "a bit of heaven."

Upon arriving at the Bennion's we sat in a huddle around a laptop and took a photo tour of Sam and his mission adventures. What fun! He truly is enjoying this experience and we laughed and cried as we went through the pictures and videos and Steph and Linds gave us an in-depth commentary.

We enjoyed a scrumptious rhubarb cobbler that Stephani made from their garden and then went for a stroll through their yard and garden and enjoyed seeing the "flags" that Steph said always remind her of Grandma Barbara, the rock project that Linds is working on, and all the beautiful landscaping that they have put their heart and soul into over the years. The Gazebo that Linds is building isn't quite finished but that is on his "to do" list for this summer and will be a charming addition to their back yard.

Saturday morning dawned sunny and warm and Steph and I spent the morning in the raspberry patch pulling out quack grass and "solving the world's problems." Lindsay's brother, Chris, helped dispose of the weeds and Linds planted a variety of bedding plants. Their half acre garden is the envy of the neighborhood and it was a joy to be a part of it. SaraKay was inside working on homework and practicing the piano and Josh was taking the PSAT. About noon we took a break and Linds grilled his famous chicken and we cut up melon and prepared the rest of the meal. We enjoyed a leisurely and delicious meal before going out to finish our garden project and then prepared to leave for Bradley's open house in Layton.

Just before going out to work in the berries, I went upstairs to the loft where SaraKay and I slept Friday night. She was sitting on a futon with her computer in her lap, studying. She commented that she felt like she was living some kind of Jane Austen adventure; to awaken after a great night's sleep in a cozy, yellow-walled bedroom, with the sun streaming in the window, a gentle breeze

blowing through the opened windows, and the sounds of birds in the air. She also mentioned the smell of waffles wafting up from the kitchen and the opportunity to spend the day with family and friends. Who could ask for anything more! I agreed.

At about 4:30 Stephani, SaraKay and I drove to Cheney's in Kaysville. We talked nonstop about all kinds of great things and laughed most of the way there. Steph drove so that I could avoid the bad traffic and she and SaraKay talked about SaraKay's upcoming student teaching. Steph was able to give her tips and advice on classroom management and philosophy. I loved sitting in on it and later talking it through with SaraKay. Right now the prospect of being in a high school classroom and teaching choir classes is enough to give SaraKay a panic attack so she is happy for any advice she can get.

We arrived at the Cheney residence a little past six and thoroughly enjoyed the chance to congratulate the newlyweds. Bradley was all smiles and his bride, Devy, is beautiful! Don and Deniece hosted a lovely open house and SaraKay and I helped Kathy and Don's sister, Deann, in the kitchen. It was fun to see Don's brothers and their families who live in the area. They are certainly an impressive bunch. One of them just completed being the construction manager for the Panama Temple and is now enroute to build a temple in Guatemala. Another has returned recently from an assignment in Europe. It was enjoyable to mix and mingle with friends and neighbors. Dick and Abby arrived about 6:30 and we had a nice visit with them. Abby has recently arrived for a visit from Maine and has two beautiful little girls, the youngest only being 9 weeks old. Time really marches on. It seems like just yesterday that we were in Salt Lake celebrating Abby and Brad's wedding.

At about 6:30 Linds, Chris, Josh, and his debate partner, Amanda picked up Stephani on their way through to Salt Lake. Steph, Linds, and Chris were going to a soccer match and Josh and Amanda were attending "Les Mis" for the evening. I so appreciated all their efforts to make our weekend so memorable!

After the reception SaraKay and I said our goodbyes and left for home. Originally we had planned a trip to visit Karen and Jim but before Saturday was over, both of our plans had changed and we had to put that visit on hold for a while. We arrived home about 10:30 and felt grateful for a wonderful time with family.

P.S. Laurel flew out yesterday for Hawaii. A dear friend and classmate invited her to join her and her parents for a week's stay in Hawaii following graduation. Laurel felt that she couldn't afford to do it but they insisted and helped pay her way for this wonderful opportunity! She was so excited for this trip-of-a-lifetime!

June 15, 2011

I've been at the FH Center all day and have been so tired after my busy week. All during the last week of May I made detailed lists of what I needed to do to be ready for my trip and all the other assignments for my big weekend in Hyde Park, my visit for Brad's open house, and my shift at the library including giving a short devotional talk during prayer meeting at 8:45. Sunday night after SaraKay left I carefully went through all my lists and loaded the car with baggage for my flight, handouts for the Cedar Badge presentation, family history briefcase, clothes for Cedar Badge, and all the stuff that I had so carefully itemized on my "lists."

I arose extra early Monday morning and went through my routine without a glitch. I was driving alone since I was going directly to the airport after my shift and I was nearly ready to leave when I realized that my phone wasn't on the nightstand where I thought I had left it the night before after taking a late call from SaraKay. I started to hunt and the minutes ticked by and I panicked when despite my hunting I couldn't find it. My departure time came and went without any success and after prayer I started searching again, to no avail. I knew that to be on time for prayer meeting I would absolutely need to leave by 8:10 but I also knew that I couldn't leave town without my phone.

Finally in desperation I finished loading the car and left, rushing to the Center to give my talk at prayer meeting. I decided that I would need to leave the Center earlier than previously planned, drive back home, find my phone, and then drive back to meet my flight out of the IF airport. It shook me up pretty bad and my time at the Center wasn't very productive. At noon I drove back to Blackfoot with a prayer in my heart that I would be able to find my phone and arrived, walked into my bedroom, and there it was lying under a thin tissue right at the bottom of my bed! I was overjoyed to find it but so frustrated that for some reason earlier in the day I hadn't been able to see it. Well, I had some lunch, changed out of my

Sunday clothes, and drove back to the airport to catch my flight.

As many of you know, I always arrive at the airport early since the process of ticketing and security still unnerve me a little. Well, I parked, got my ticket, went through security without a hitch, and was sitting at the gate by 3:30 for my 5:50 flight. At about 4:00 a voice announced over the PA system that my flight would be delayed until 9:00! I couldn't believe it! I would have really grumbled and moaned except that I was surrounded by young mothers who were traveling with young children and my heart went out to them having to wait with their little ones for an additional three hours. Anyway, what a long day it turned out to be! Thankfully I had taken a book to read and so I was able to fill the time constructively. I offered to help one of the young mothers and visited with some of the other passengers and the time did pass, the plane did arrive, and I was in Mesa by 11 pm, tired but none the worse for wear.

Such was my crazy day that began a truly delightful stay in Chandler with Becky and family. Tate, as usual, gave up his bedroom for Grandma Susan and I slept well, ate well, thoroughly enjoyed being a part of the Seely household, and hopefully helped with all the many comings and goings while Becky and Maddie attended Girls Camp, Wednesday through Saturday.

After my hair-raising experiences driving the children around the last time I babysat for Becky, she decided that this time she would hire a friend to pick up the kids for their summer programs and spare me the trauma of dealing with Chandler traffic. And so each morning Tate left for band camp and Larsen and Cole went to their math and reading summer programs and I had a couple hours to get organized for the day. When they arrived home we spent time in the pool, playing on the trampoline, going to the Chandler library, and had an afternoon at a water park. We watched movies, read books, fixed meals and smoothies, went shopping, had lunch at McDonalds and made the most of our time together. What fun for all of us! We even spent a little time organizing the boy's bedrooms and cleaned the garage as a surprise for Becky.

By Saturday afternoon we were ready to welcome Becky and Maddie home after their fun-filled but very exhausting time in the mountains. Fortunately they were nowhere near the fires that were devastating so much of Arizona and they had an injury-free time with their ward. Everyone I talked to gave high praise for their camp and the lack of drama that sometimes occurs when teen-age girls live, eat, and sleep together. Sunday, we attended their meetings and I got to meet many of the wonderful friends in their ward.

Sunday night one of her friends, Gary Findlayson, came for dinner and then we all enjoyed playing "Catch Phrase" and "Uno" while sitting on the trampoline and enjoying a truly beautiful Arizona evening. It wasn't hard to understand why people love Arizona! Although the days were hot, the evenings were perfect and everyone just adjusts to what they can and can't do during these hot summer days.

I was grateful that I had some talk time with Becky even though a lot of her week was filled with camp and preparations. She is doing remarkably well being a single mom and I can see that she has made some critical decisions that have helped her keep her family stable during this time. She has chosen to have regular family prayer and scripture time and FHE. She has also committed to not being bitter or speaking of Chet in any way but with respect and love. I think this positive attitude has allowed the children to accept what has happened and move ahead with optimism and confidence. Sunday morning was spent with the children creating Father's Day cards for Chet to accompany the gift they were going to buy and send. Despite her own grief she has chosen to keep bitterness out of their home and they are all blessed because of this. The work load Becky carries is heavy, especially when she is taking college classes but she is trying to simplify and use her time for her first priorities: the children and their home environment. I know that she has appreciated all the wonderful support from siblings. She needs our continued prayers.

She and the kids dropped me off at the airport and my flight went off without a hitch. I arrived in Idaho Falls at 5:15, drove to Rexburg to pick up SaraKay, and we drove to Island Park Scout Camp for the program honoring Dad. Anna Call who was in charge of the Steve Larsen Crew invited us to join them that night for a short program honoring Dad. I had ordered some beautiful pewter landing eagle lapel pins and also made up a scrapbook page that I will attach with this letter. On the way to camp we drove through one of the most frightening rainstorms I have ever seen. The water was coming so fast the wipers couldn't

handle it and for a while we crept along at about 30mph behind a string of other cars. By the time we left the main highway the storm had abated and we drove into camp at just about the exact time we had committed to be there.

After a thoroughly warm welcome Anna informed us that we were the program and that they had planned for us to take about a half hour just talking about Dad. I had previously given her the part of our Volume I history in the Eagle Scout section on Dad so I supposed that she was going to talk about him but she turned the time to us so SaraKay and I talked together about Daddy, his early years, his scouting experience, family, and his values. It worked out really well and we had such good feedback from the staff when we were through.

As we drove back to Rexburg SaraKay and I felt pretty euphoric about the whole experience and how sweet it had been for us. I was really proud of SaraKay for how she handled herself. She had just had a major paper due that day as well as her vocal juries that morning so she had had a big day but going to Island Park Scout Camp together brought back wonderful memories of when Daddy was director there and we handled the trading post. Can you believe it was 10 years ago!

After dropping SaraKay off in Rexburg I drove home and got here about 11:30. Tuesday I spent the day at the FH Center and today I've spent part of the day catching up and filling out mission papers. I guess I'm committed. This Friday and Saturday I'll be in the temple.

June 28, 2011

Summer has finally arrived in Moreland, Idaho. The last two days have been so pleasant and warm and remind me again of why I live in Idaho. Yesterday while Mike drove to Rexburg and helped SaraKay with her mission dental examination Marci and I spent the day in the back yard, enjoying the weather and entertaining Amber, Ellie, and Olivia. It was so nice to finally be able to shed our coats and soak in the sun. We so appreciate Mike's willingness to help out with SaraKay's dental work. He is always more than willing but finding time in his busy schedule becomes the challenge.

Last week was full of places to go and things to do. Knowing that I had a vacation from June 20th to July 5th from the Center as well as the temple, I scheduled all of my mission exams. I'm grateful that I did because by the time I had had an exam, blood work, immunizations, TB tests and filled out the forms, I had pretty much used up my week. Even though I might receive a call to go to Utah or somewhere close, I still had to have all of the immunizations and tests. It took longer than I thought it would and several repeat visits to get things completed.

The last of the visits was Friday morning before I left for Utah to attend my high school friends' reunion in Orem. As some of you will remember my five high school friends get together each summer for an overnighter and visiting. This year Annette Olsen hosted at her home in Orem. Since most of the women have family in the SLC and Provo area, I was unable to work out a carpool and so I made the trip alone. It is the first time since Daddy died that I have driven myself through SLC and I was taken by surprise by the frenetic pace of things. When I passed point of the mountain, I was totally shocked by how much growth has taken place! It seemed like one continuous city from Ogden on through to Provo and the traffic at the BYU Provo exit was horrendous. But the trip proved to be challenging for me in more ways than just dealing with the traffic. It was the first time I have been back to Provo since Daddy died. I just kept thinking about how many times we made that trip when we had all of you kids there for college and it turned out to be a rather painful journey down memory lane. I should have taken some audio book tapes to listen to or something because I was pretty melancholy by the time I arrived at the Olsen household.

Our overnighter was really fun! All six of us attended and we went to Zuppa's for supper and walked along a path by the Provo River. What is usually a meandering stream has become a raging torrent with all the snow runoff from the mountains and I was grateful that we weren't chasing little grandkids and trying to keep them out of the water. It was running so deep and fast it was scary! We later visited into the wee hours of the morning and finally got to sleep about 2:00 a.m. The next morning Annette fed us a delicious breakfast and we visited a while more before leaving for home.

According to prior arrangements I drove to Burley to help Mike and Marci with their busy weekend. I arrived about 3:00 and we had a couple hours before they left to take their non-member neighbors out to dinner. They are trying to do some fellowshipping with them since their arrival about a year ago. Mike was scheduled to present

a stake singles fireside on Sunday evening and he was trying to get his pictures from his humanitarian trip to Ecuador organized and ready for the presentation. We got kids to bed and enjoyed a delicious bowl of ice cream before retiring ourselves. Sunday morning dawned early and since we had until 1:00 for our meetings I took the girls on a neighborhood stroller ride and we enjoyed the beautiful morning. About 11:30 we went into the house and everyone got into their Sunday duds and ready to leave for Church.

Since Marci works in the Primary and Mike is busy with his bishoping, I attended RS and Sunday School with an old college roommate who is in their ward. Following our meetings we hurried home to get dinner on and Mike and Marci ready for their engagements that evening. While we were all sitting at the dining room table I glanced down at my hand and to my horror realized that the diamond had fallen out of my wedding ring! I was so stunned that I just sat there staring at my hand and finally muttered something like, "My diamond is gone!" I quickly looked all around me without moving in the hopes that maybe it had just fallen out but found nothing. I knew that Mike and Marci needed to hurry to be ready to leave and so we all just quickly cleared away the table and got them on their way. Mike said that he would check at the Church before the fireside.

I finished up the dishes and Olivia went down for a nap and Amber and Ellie were playing outside so I went to the bedroom and pled with the Lord to enlighten my mind and help me recover the diamond. I mentally rehearsed everywhere I had been since putting on the ring just before leaving for Church at about 12:45. Then I began a thorough search. I carefully swept the kitchen/dining room. I looked all over in the bathroom and got on my hands and knees and traversed the living room and hall way although finding it amidst the light-colored shag carpet seemed a near impossibility. I search the kitchen, the bag of potatoes that I got potatoes out for dinner, the kitchen work area, the garage, the van floor. I emptied my suitcase to see if perchance it had fallen into my clothes when I was loading them after changing. I even sifted through the leftover gravy to see if the diamond had fallen into the pot when I was making gravy. Every time I walked past the kitchen sink, I shuddered to think that maybe in my work that morning I had lost it down the drain.

I was just sick. It was Barbara's old wedding ring and I received it from Daddy when the estate was divided up and I have loved it and been so careful with it. I felt so sad and when Mike and Marci returned, I asked Mike if he had checked at the church and he admitted that he had been so stressed about his presentation that he had forgotten in all the rush. Marci immediately suggested that we stop on our way out of Burley and look for it. I hated to be a burden but I was desperate.

When we arrived at the Church Mike stayed with the three girls and Marci and I walked up and down the halls, into the bathroom, and checked in the Relief Society room where I had been sitting. We then went into the chapel and got on our hands and knees at the front of the chapel where we had been sitting for sacrament meeting. There, perched on the carpet right in front of where I was sitting was my diamond. As you can imagine, it was just a tiny speck against the lavender carpet but there it was! I wanted to weep with joy! Marci suggested that we have prayer right there and then and we did and gave thanks for this tender mercy! We joyfully rejoined the group waiting in the parking lot and we left for Blackfoot, grateful and light-hearted to have retrieved that which was lost!
I can't describe the relief that I have felt since finding it. I know that it could have fallen out at any time in that busy, busy day. How grateful I am that it happened when it did, where it did and that I was able to find it. I know the Lord intervened in my behalf and I am so grateful for it.

We arrived home about 10:30, put kids to bed, and we retired shortly thereafter. Monday morning Mike left for Rexburg and Marci and I had a leisurely day with the girls (although when you are eight months pregnant and chasing around a two-year-old, no day is leisurely). They left last night about 6:30 and I spent a quiet evening.

I was disappointed to find out that the Allan Larsen reunion is schedule the same day as SaraKay's senior recital. Originally the recital was scheduled for the ninth but circumstances evolved to put the recital on that day instead of the ninth of July. We are going to divide up and try to support both but it isn't ideal and I'm sorry that it has come to this. Steve and Bonnie will attend the reunion that day and Steph and Linds will attend the recital with me. If Mike and Tim can come it will be a speedy trip here and back since Marci is at the stage where she needs Mike close at hand. I have emailed Gary about our situation and hope that I can still slip in for a good visit before the day is over.

SaraKay asked last week if it would be possible while we were all gathered that last weekend in July if we could all go to the temple with her to receive her endowments. We talked it through and thought that we might could do it Friday morning in Logan. This morning, I called the temple only to discover that Logan is closed the entire month of July for maintenance and cleaning. Ogden is being remodeled, Brigham City's temple isn't completed, the SLC temple is close in July, and maybe the Bountiful one, too. Rats! I called SaraKay this morning to discuss it with her and she was enroute to a special dinner with BYU-I President Kim Clark and the Tuesday devotional speaker, Cheryl Lant (past general president of the Primary). She and about 10 other students had been nominated for this honor and she was supposed to come to the dinner with a question in mind for the VIP's and then to join them on the stand during the devotional. She was happy to be nominated but nervous about the whole affair and trying to think up some question that would be appropriate. She promised to call later today and tell me about the whole experience.

I appreciated Becky and Bonnie's family updates. As I mentioned in last week's letter, Laurel and kids left Shanghai for Ohio to spend a month before returning to school in August. John is following about the 15th. Well, what should have been about a 20 hour flight turned into a nightmare when the plane sat on the runway in Shanghai for four hours before ever taking flight and things went from bad to worse from there. Both James and Tessa got sick and were throwing up and of course they all missed their connecting flights in New York. For several hours Laurel who didn't yet have an American cell phone walked from terminal to terminal trying to get a connecting flight to Cincinnati. Here she is with four children and seven suitcases and rushing to and fro trying to get help. Finally, she sat the suitcases in a corner of the terminal, sat the kids on the suitcases, and told them to stay put until she returned. She found a flight that would get them to Ohio and she and the kids arrived at her parent's home about 36 hours after leaving Shanghai! What a nightmare! Anyone who has flown with young children can certainly sympathize with her distress.

July 4, 2011

Happy Fourth of July!!! SaraKay and I have had a fun but restful weekend here. I spent last week catching up on all kinds of projects and getting ready for my FH Center and temple assignments this week. SaraKay arrived home Saturday morning with some laundry and a long "to do" list. The semester is winding down and with it all the end of the year performances, recitals, papers, and details. It's been fun to listen to her practicing both her piano and vocal in preparation for her upcoming recital on the 16th. She is understandably nervous.

Sunday morning she left for her singles ward at nine and I was reading through my Sunday School lesson when I got a call from Katie Bennion (of Mammoth Hot Springs fame.) She had driven to Mike and Marci's on Friday night and spent the night, and then attended her BYU roommate's wedding at the Twin Falls Temple on Friday. Although she and several other roommates couldn't be present for the actual ceremony since they haven't been endowed yet, they still had a great time and participated all day Saturday in the festivities. Saturday night after helping at the reception they got a motel room and stayed up late visiting and enjoying being together. Sunday Katie, driving back to Mammoth, called to see if she could come visit for a while. She arrived a few minutes later and we had such a pleasant chat together. At my invitation she decided to go to with me to my meetings and that was a delightful treat. Several of the ward members thought she was SaraKay with a new hairdo and that was fun until they discovered that she wasn't.

Following meetings, we joined SaraKay at home and continued with our visiting and then spent some time on the computer viewing some of the baby pictures of her and SaraKay in their early years. We got to laughing so hard we were almost rolling on the floor. We also sat in the swing in the back yard and enjoyed the absolutely beautiful weather. About six she left for Yellowstone and we commented that we were so glad she had made time to drop in and spice up our day!

Today has been quiet but productive and soon SaraKay will be leaving for Idaho Falls and the fireworks there. A group of college friends are meeting her on the banks of the river for a picnic and games before the actual fireworks begin. I will be back to the Center tomorrow, substitute at the temple on Wednesday and have my regular shift on Friday. I've spent a lot of time these last couple of days nailing down details for the reunion and planning meals and grocery lists. The days are flying by.

I called Shauntel on Thursday morning to discover that Randy had been in an auto accident but fortunately was not seriously hurt. I have tried to reach them to see how he is getting along but they must be out celebrating because I can't reach them on either phone. Hopefully he will not have any lasting effects from his injuries.
I also called Laurel and she was going in for Lasik surgery earlier in the week. She and the kids have had a busy week, helping her sister, Marcia, who has a new baby and helping with another sister's children, too. She was in good spirits and said that the kids were enjoying their cousins and their break from life in Shanghai. I'm sure John is missing them and anxious to join them in a couple of weeks.

July 10, 2011

I've spent the morning finishing up mission papers and had an appointment this afternoon with the bishop. Ditto for SaraKay. I drove to Rexburg last night to attend a concert with her and to reassure her regarding her recital. About now it is very real and the jitters are setting in. She will be grateful to have it over and move on. The concert last night was spectacular! It involved all the choirs on campus as well as the top band and was entitled "Patriots and Pioneers" and featured wonderful music about freedom, courage, and soldiers. The new I-Center is a wonderful venue for events such as this. It still astounds me to think that such a magnificent facility is right here in Idaho!

It was nice to get back after a two-week vacation to my Family History and temple assignments. I so enjoy the other missionaries and ordinance workers. The Idaho Falls Temple is undergoing extensive grounds renovation and so everything is pretty torn up but they left one small corner undisturbed so that photo shoots are possible. I am no longer working with the own endowments as I have rotated out now, but it's a relief since I need to get substitutes for two weeks in July and it's easier to be replaced if you don't have a major responsibility.

Plans for the Steve Larsen reunion are moving forward thanks to Steph and Steve. They have been a huge help. This week (Thursday) Mark and Rita and Jessica will be coming and spend Thursday night and Friday night prior to the Larsen (Allan) reunion. Jeanie and Scot will also be coming but not until Friday night. I'm excited to see everyone. I appreciate all that Lisa and Gary have done to get this reunion put together.

I had another tender mercy this week. I have been worrying about my pasture; the grass was getting so long and I knew Bruce Ellis's horse wasn't going to be able to eat it all down. I was worrying about the whole fire hazard thing and wondering if I needed to get another horse to help. I didn't want to mess with it since most horses are pretty tough on the fences. On Monday Bruce called and said that he was having Harper's cut and bale his pasture and he would do mine, too if he could take the hay off of it. I was overjoyed since last year I was totally on my own and it was a hassle. So, to make this story short, Harpers came and cut and swathed it, and even got it baled. What a relief! Today in my bishop's interview he asked me what I was planning to do with my home and I told me that I was going to do some bargaining with my neighbors and try to take care of it that way. I'm making up lists of what needs to be done on a weekly basis and then I will approach them about some kind of an agreement.

July 18, 2011

I was so tired last night that I didn't get this letter written and now I'm glad because when I got home from the FH Center there was an email from Steve with a bunch of pictures that he took at the reunion on Saturday. They about say it all. It was especially nice since I missed the morning part of the reunion and seeing the pictures was a real treat. Steve got some wonderful shots of the six siblings!
But I'm getting ahead of myself, so let me backtrack a little and relate some of the activities that made last week so memorable. First, I want to mention that earlier in the week as I visited with SaraKay, she expressed her anxiety about her upcoming recital. She was doubting herself and worrying about not being prepared for it. I knew that she was under a lot of pressure and we both agreed to make it a matter of prayer. As the week progressed, she called almost every day and each day she related to me some tender mercy that she had experienced that had built up her confidence. I could feel her anxiety releasing a little and knew that the Lord was helping her know that she would be alright and able to remember her pieces and get through it.

I had carefully planned out my weekend since Mark and Rita and Jessica were coming in on Thursday and spending that night and Friday night with me before the reunion on Saturday. Jeanie and Scott would arrive on Friday afternoon so I had planned meals and had things in readiness. I had also baked poppy seed and banana bread

and purchased watermelon and cantaloupe which I planned to serve at the reception following the recital. Mark and Rita called Thursday morning with a change of plans and said they wouldn't be able to get here until Friday night and that gave me a little more time to get everything ready.

Thursday night I went to the open house for the new school building that Gary is principal of. They have been holding school these past few years in temporary classrooms and the new building has been in process for most of that time. They held an open house and invited the public to come see the school (The Idaho Science and Technology Charter School) and it was a big success with lots of visitors and personally guided tours for the guests. It was especially fun since most of Gary and Linda's kids were there and had helped with the preparations. Gary can be proud of what the school has accomplished these last few years and I'm sure they have a lot of students and parents pleased with the opportunities it provides.

Friday, I spent the day in the temple and arrived home about 5:30. Mark and Rita arrived about 20 minutes earlier and we were just getting the table set and dinner on when we thought we heard Scot and Jeanie arrive. But it turned out to be Steph, Linds, and Josh who were enroute to Rexburg to meet up with Kate and go to Harry Potter together. They stayed and visited for a while and then continued on to Rexburg but not before Scot and Jeanie arrived and they got a chance to see them. I couldn't talk the Bennions into staying for supper but after they left we had a nice meal together and then visited late into the night. Mark kept us all laughing with his own brand of Larsen humor and we finally got to bed after midnight.

Saturday morning dawned early as I finished my preparations for the recital. I sliced the breads and loaded a huge platter with them, cut up melon and cantaloupe, filled my 5-gallon thermos with ice water and sliced lemons and limes, packed the car with boxes of paper products, tablecloths, flowers for the vocal teacher, chocolates for the piano teacher, cut daisies from the front flower garden for the table decorations, and then left about 10:00 for Rexburg. Steve arrived about that time with Rachel, Chrissy, and Anne Marie and they all helped me haul things out. Anne Marie went with her dad to the reunion and Rachel and Chrissy stuck with me and we drove to Rexburg arriving about 11:15 for the noon recital. Thanks to Rachel, Chrissy, and Steph, Linds, Katie, and Josh who met us at the Snow Building, we got everything hauled up to the second story and had things pretty much set up in time for the recital to start. I was so grateful for everyone's help!

About 11:50 Mike and Tim arrived with Amber and Ellie and we greeted SaraKay for a few minutes before her performance. She was very pleased and surprised to have a wonderful show of family and friends at the recital. She did a great job and looked so beautiful in her black sequined performing dress. The reception following was fun and fortunately I had brought extra food since we had planned to feed 40 and ended up feeding 50! Needless to say, we didn't have to worry about leftovers. Following the reception Steph and Linds left for Yellowstone with Katie and were going to spend a few days there with her before returning to Hyde Park. Mike and Tim and girls drove back and attended the Larsen reunion. Rachel and Chrissy and I finished cleaning up at the reception and then left for home. We arrived at the Larsen reunion about three and had a delightful time renewing friendship there. Let me mention who was there. Gary, Linda, Mindy, Roger and kids, Garon, Alison and family, Lisa and two sons, Ashley, Jeff and their new baby, Ryan and three children, Staff and Kaye, Jeanie and Scott, Rick, Terry, Amanda, Ryan and little one, Karen and Jim, me, Steve and three girls, Mike and Tim with Amber and Ellie.

The reunion started at 10:00 and the group went to visit several family graves in the Goshen and Firth cemeteries and enjoyed the chance to learn a little more about that. They also visited the old home place and saw Grandpa J. Berkeley Larsen's home as well as the home where Allan and Barbara lived until Daddy was in the sixth grade. I think it was enjoyed by all. After a delicious lunch at the shelter at the West Stake Center we had another short program honoring Grandpa and Grandma Larsen and Dad. The group dispersed about five. Karen and Jim and Scott and Jeanie came here as did Steve and girls and we spent another hour visiting and enjoying the chance to be together. Steve and Karen and Jim left for home about seven and Scott and Jeanie and I visited into the night. They left Sunday morning about 10:30 for Jim and Karen's. What a wonderful treat for me to get to see so many of the family. I so appreciate all of Gary and Linda's efforts to put the reunion together. I know they were on overload with open houses, family visiting from afar, and everything else they had going on. Thanks again for all your work!

I just talked with SaraKay and she is feeling like life is good and the pressure is off! Now on to graduation this Friday and she will really be footloose. I've got our Steve Larsen reunion on my mind and hope to be able to make major strides in preparations for that before Paul and Jenny arrive next Tuesday.

July 25, 2011

It's a beautiful summer's day outside and perfect weather for the Pioneer Sunday program that the ward has planned. We are starting our meetings at 11:00, having sacrament meeting at 1:00 in the shelter on the stake center grounds, and then having a pot luck lunch to commemorate the holiday. SaraKay has already left for her singles' ward and will meet with us at one to help with the music for my sacrament meeting. It's been fun to have her here and to know that she has no homework and no practicing that needs to be done. Yesterday we spent most of the day unloading her car and making the decisions as to what to take to Mesa and what to leave here. I was busy getting ready for my company this coming week so we had a busy but relaxing day.

On Friday I got a substitute for my temple assignment and drove to Rexburg to attend graduation. I had been pretty melancholy all week just thinking about how sending SaraKay off to college was one of the last things Daddy did before passing away and here I was attending her graduation! I think another reason I was melancholy was that SaraKay hasn't been ready to leave BYU-I. She has had such a great time and enjoyed her experience so much that she wasn't that anxious to be through with that stage of her life. And yet here we were going through the motions and the ceremony and feeling unsettled about what the next stage will bring. We'll probably both feel better when our mission calls arrive and we have something definitive on that.

We had a wonderful time at graduation and I took lots of pictures, the best of which SaraKay has posted on her Facebook page. It was fun to be on BYU-I campus for the festivities and graduation was held in the new I-Center which is a wonderful venue for any event. The convocation was held in the Kirkham Auditorium and was thoroughly enjoyable. Since it was the College of Performing and Visual Arts, instead of a speaker they had musical numbers, a dance number, and an art presentation. We were through with both commencement and the convocation by 8:00 and went to dinner shortly thereafter. SaraKay spent another night with her roommates and then got home yesterday about 10:00. Already the pace of things around here has picked up as is usually the case when she is in my life again. I'm not looking forward to her moving to Mesa. I know I am going to go through withdrawal but it's a necessary step and will prepare me for our missions. Although I'll have the freedom to keep touch with you kids, she'll be on a letters-only status and I'll miss her daily check-in.

Right now I'm working out the details of our upcoming reunion and can think of little else. My prayers are for everyone's safety. The intricacies of everyone's travel plans are enough to make one's head hurt. The more of us there are, the more complicated this "gathering" gets and I'm so grateful for everyone's efforts and sacrifices to make this happen. This reunion will be an emotional one for me knowing that my life is going to be changing in the months ahead and my interactions will be more limited. Life is certainly full of transitions and opportunities to stretch.

Last night I watched the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Orchestra at Temple Square Pioneer Day concert on BYU TV. It was so amazing. They featured many songs about America and interviewed people who have served or are presently serving in Iraq. One of the soldiers was a young woman who was a medic on assignment and whose mother performs with the Choir. They showed footage of her interacting with the Iraqi children and she told of very touching experiences she had as she and her group left the village where they had spent several months. Another soldier (who presently sings with the Choir) was about 55 and he and his two sons were all in the Guard and called up at the same time, leaving behind his wife and the wives and young families of his sons. Another person they interviewed was an aged African American who had served with a black platoon that was segregated from the white soldiers but who distinguished themselves during the Second World War. His son, Brian Stokes Mitchell (who was the Broadway star of "Ragtime") performed with the Choir and it was so touching. I couldn't help thinking that the Church is trying so hard to reach out and convince the world that whomever they are, there is a place in the Church for them. I think some of us Utah/Idaho Mormons have a difficult time realizing that much of what we think of in terms of the Church is culturally based instead of doctrinally. Anyway, the concert was absolutely stunning and performed to a sell-

out crowd. What a treasure the Conference Center is to the SLC area!

August 4, 2011

Although most of you are already aware, just for the record, Mike and Marci have a new baby boy as of Tuesday morning at about 7:30. He has dark hair and weighed in at 7 pounds 10 ounces. They haven't selected a name yet. Congratulations to the proud parents! Marci's mom, Karen, has been there helping with the three little girls and Mike is on a three-week maternity leave so between the two of them things are running smoothly. Marci had a C-section so she was feeling pretty punk when John, Laurel, and family and I visited her on Tuesday afternoon. We all got a chance to hold the baby and get acquainted with him. He is beautiful and we are so grateful that everything went well for both mother and baby.

As most of you are also aware, SaraKay's mission call arrived today. She will enter the Brazilian MTC on December 28th and her call is to the Brazil Ribeirao Preto Mission. On Tuesday and Wednesday mornings I called the Blackfoot Post Office in an attempt to track the letter since SaraKay's bishop let her know that it was mailed out; both mornings the postmaster informed me that it hadn't arrived. He asked what I was waiting for and I mentioned that my daughter's mission call was expected any day. Last night SaraKay asked if I would call again this morning but I confessed that I was feeling a little sheepish about it and would rather not. About 8:30 the mail carrier called and said that it had arrived and that she would deliver it today! What a sweet gesture on her part. At 10:30 I was outside and noticed that the flag on the mailbox was down indicating that my letter had gone out and that the mail was here. I hurried to the mailbox and then hurried and cut open the letter so that I could read it to SaraKay the minute she answered the phone. She was thrilled with the call and we both shed a few tears as we visited about this exciting news.

When SaraKay left the reunion on Monday she drove to Mesa, AZ. In the week after her graduation she completed an eye exam and Mike did her dental work. She also did some shopping and sorted through all her Rexburg stuff, packing only the bare necessities for her four-month stay in Mesa. She drove her car to the reunion and agreed to drive Tim to the Salt Lake Airport where he caught a plane to Dallas for a week-long business trip. She continued on, staying with a dear friend, Jordan Curtis, in Castledale, Utah for a day while he finished his preparations for his summer stay in Phoenix. She was able to meet his parents and family and stayed with his grandmother Monday night. On Tuesday he completed his preparations and the two of them did some sightseeing. Wednesday morning early they left for AZ and had a trouble-free but long trip, arriving in the Phoenix area about five that afternoon. She dropped Jordan off at his sister's house and continued on alone, trying to navigate rush hour traffic and find all the exits, etc. Later when she called and mentioned her experience driving through Phoenix, she said it was one of the most frightening things she has done in a long time. I was so grateful to know that she had arrived safe and sound and the car didn't have any problems. She called and visited several times today and has met her roommates and is impressed with them. Her apartment is lovely and she has her own room although she doesn't have any furniture so she is sleeping on a small mattress and has her clothes folded in laundry baskets and is using them in lieu of dresser drawers.

She has her first meeting tomorrow with the other teachers at Red Mountain High School and then will meet with her mentor for a few hours to see what he has in mind for her. She is definitely out of her comfort zone and says that it’s hard to be living without a piano close at hand. Hopefully she will have a positive experience and enjoy her time in sunny Arizona. Becky finished up another class online today and she and kids have invited SaraKay to dinner tomorrow. It’s nice to know that she has some family close and can get a touch of home from Becky.

John and Laurel left yesterday about 10 for the SLC Airport and their flight to Ohio. Today they are at a theme park and on Friday or Saturday they fly back to Shanghai. Laurel and the kids have been in the States since the middle of June and John has been here since July 15th. The kids start school in a week so their summer is winding down and they are anxious to return to China and their activities there. Paul and Jenny left the reunion Monday morning at 6:30 with a full car and sleepy-eyed kids and had kind of a rough start with a shredded tire and delays with that but ultimately things settled down and they arrived home about 30 hours later on Tuesday morning, blurry eyed but happy to have the trip behind them. Hard as it is to travel all night, with five

young children it was their preferred method and they were happy that it worked out for them.

Shauntel and Randy had an Archibald reunion Wednesday-Saturday and so they have their long trip ahead. They spent Tuesday night at Steph and Linds' and relished the chance to do some one-on-one visiting. I'm assuming that everyone else arrived safe and sound. It's always a blessing for everyone to complete the trip without accident and injury and a relief to know that you are almost all back home safely and that another Larsen reunion has been successfully completed.

I felt like our reunion was the best one yet! It seemed like everyone was so thrilled to be together and to get reacquainted. What a bit of heaven for me to have all of you there (including Don and Lisa and girls). Of course, Marci and Sam were missed but hopefully the pictures will give them a chance to feel of the spirit of the occasion. Before John and Laurel left, they transferred all of Steve's pictures to my Picasa account and put the family group picture as my screen saver.

It would be difficult to name what my favorite activity was. From the beach and boating to the giant slip and slide to the insight session to the talent show to the Sunday sacrament meetings to the blessing given SaraKay and me by the sons and sons-in-law, it was truly a wonderful time. I am so appreciative of each of you for making time to attend despite the elaborate arrangements that had to be made. I want to express appreciation to Steve and Bonnie for their part in lining up the slip and slide activity, for the clever bracelets, for his boat schedule and Dutch oven chicken meal, and for all their help in so many ways to make this reunion so successful. I appreciated Steve's hours of picture taking, editing, and posting for all of us and his wonderful family history presentation on the first Larsen that joined the Church. His work with ancestry.com and informative handouts were a labor of love. His friend who helped with the boat was so pleasant and kind to us. I also want to thank Steph for planning the meals and for all the shopping, packing, and hauling she did to have sufficient grub for this huge group of hungry people. Her help in the kitchen was invaluable and her counsel to me over the course of the months of preparation were so helpful. I appreciated Linds driving the other boat and making sure that everyone had a great time in the water. To each of you who lent a helping hand when you saw a need and to all who helped clean the lodge Monday a big thank you, too.

I've felt a great relief to have the reunion safely over and to have had this wonderful time together. As I drove home in caravan with Becky and John and families, I had a lot of quiet time to think through the events of the past three days. I felt that Daddy was aware of our gathering and I know that he is pleased with each of you and your efforts to live the gospel and carry on his good name. May the Lord bless and strengthen each of you. I love you.

August 14, 2011

I've spent most of the morning going over all of SaraKay's visa and travel papers trying to figure out how we can fulfill all of these requirements in her state of residency with her in AZ. I've got a long list of questions to ask the missionary medical and missionary travel people in Salt Lake so hopefully I can resolve these issues and have all the paper work returned to SLC by September 6th. SaraKay is having her bishop's and stake president's interviews in her new ward in Mesa and she and Becky scheduled an own endowment appointment for Thursday night. I am going to catch an Allegiant flight out of Idaho Falls Thursday afternoon and go with her to the temple and then return Sunday morning. It will be quick but hopefully we will be able to confer on these papers, get the needed signatures, the needed notary signatures, and get them on their way. I've heard from several people that visas are a problem in Brazil and that many times they are delayed until the visas come through, hence the pressure to be speedy with all of this paperwork. I'd forgotten about all the red tape associated with going foreign.

I spent Wednesday and Thursday in Burley helping Mike and Marci and their growing family. Little Tanner is an absolute dream baby! He just eats and sleeps and hardly makes a peep. At this point emotions are pretty tender with mother and the three little girls but I could see that Marci is strengthening and the adjustment is being made. Mike has one more week off for maternity leave and he is getting pretty handy around the house. He is a great dad and has a good relationship with each of his girls. For now Marci is limited on what she can lift so I was so grateful that her mother was able to help for a week and that I could help even though it was for only a short time. I was amazed at how capable Amber is. She was able to hold Tanner, feed him, and help in other ways. She is growing up and will be starting kindergarten in two weeks. What an exciting time of life for their whole family! They've

got their hands (and hearts) really full at this time and need our continuing prayers in their behalf.

I had a scare on Thursday. We were just finishing up lunch at Mike and Marci's when a call came in from Bishop Adams. He said the missionary department was trying to reach President Jenks but had been unable to so they called him. They had a call for me but needed to talk with my local leaders about the situation. They wanted me to leave on September 12th instead of when SaraKay leaves. I was totally stunned by this development and Bishop Adams could hear it in my voice and said for me to consider it and that he would call me back in about an hour. I wanted to cry but tried to keep it together and come up with my answer. I knew that I wanted to be here until SaraKay left and I couldn't imagine getting her out the door in December without me here to help. Anyway, about 10 minutes later President Jenks called. He had been on the line with the missionary department and he told them that he could speak for me and that no, I couldn't take an assignment until the end of December. Then he said that he got to feeling guilty about giving them an answer for me and thought that he should call me and ask me first. I told him about Bishop Adams' phone call and he further elaborated on what the calling would be. I would be setting up and supervising senior sister missionaries who would be called to activate and teach nonmember and less active single sisters in the mission field. It certainly sounded like a great assignment but President Jenks said that he thought family first and mission second and that SaraKay needed my support at home. It was such a relief to have him voice that because that was exactly how I felt. There are so many details to take care of with this missionary call not to mention all the hoopla associated with the actual departure. I so appreciated President Jenks! Well, that crisis is over and I'm breathing a sigh of relief.

I had a good visit with Tim last night. Hopefully he won't mind if I fill you in on some of what is happening with him. As some of you know Tim arrived at the reunion late Friday night because his tennis team was playing in a tournament. He is a part of an elite team that affiliates with a country club there in Boise. They approached Tim about joining their team and offered to pay the club membership fee for him. He has enjoyed the chance but since our reunion conflicted with the tournament he bowed out and the team went on to take second in the state. There was a little feeling on the team that they would have been the state champions if their entire team had been there. Although they will never know and they didn't make a fuss to Tim about it, I appreciated that Tim put the reunion high on his list of priorities and was there with us. The team held a party last night at one of the team members' homes and he said it was super posh. He commented that he didn't know why tennis attracts the rich and famous but it does. I suggested that he might open his own accounting firm and have some of his team members as clients. He didn't seem even tempted.

Last week Tim flew to Dallas for the big Scentsy convention. He was in charge of the store associated with the convention and supervised 42 check-out locations. He was on his feet for about 14 hours a day and by the time the week was over he was so miserable with his back that he could hardly move. He came home committed to find some answers. He said it has been several years since he started into this and despite physical therapy and chiropractic help, he still has the problem. On Tuesday he saw a spine specialist, thinking that he was going to need surgery but after taking an MRI the specialist told him that he thought his problem could be solved with steroid shots into the spine where the disc is dislocated. Anyway, it was pretty good news and Tim is hoping for some relief. He talked through his tennis and other athletic pursuits with the doctor and he didn't seem to think that it was doing any more damage. It is usually the standing in one place that is hardest on him and physical activity has given him a reprieve from the pain so the doctor said to carry on with his activities and hopefully this theory will work for him.
I'm so grateful that he is getting some answers.

On Friday and Saturday I worked in the temple. I had several "sitting quietly" assignments and got to thinking about our extended family and some of the transitions we are experiencing with the coming of fall. Katie returns to BYU, Josh gets into his senior year, Rachel begins her final year of high school, Laurel leaves for BYU and begins her college career, Mike and Marci send Amber off to kindergarten as do Paul and Jenny with Sophie, and SaraKay and I are getting ready to leave, too. I know that so many of you are stretched to the limit with all your responsibilities in work, family, and Church. My life is so calm compared to each of yours and my prayers are always in your behalf that you will have health and strength and stamina to meet your daily challenges. How I love you and admire you for all you are and are

doing! I told Tim last night that the reunion was so magical for me and that as I look at the pictures again (and again and again) I am filled with gratitude for each of you. Tim said the reunion was the highlight of his year and that made my day, too. Love to all.

August 22, 2011

I spent the weekend in Arizona with SaraKay and Becky and her family and returned yesterday afternoon in time to attend my own ward's Sunday school and Relief Society. I flew on Allegiant Air on Thursday, arriving at about 3:30 in Mesa. SaraKay was there to pick me up and we hurried to her apartment to change and get ready for our appointment for her own endowment at 5:00. It was sweet to be in the Mesa Temple for the occasion although I would have loved to have her go through the IF Temple. I know many of the sisters who work in the own endowment area and it would have been special to introduce them to SaraKay. Despite our efforts it just didn't work to have her fly here and try to fit it in between school days and she was anxious to go through and then be able to attend weekly before she leaves on her mission. Anyway, we got to the temple right on time and Becky met us at 6:30 for the endowment session. I've only been to the Mesa Temple one other time and I had forgotten how beautiful it is! What a thrill to be there and share in the experience with Becky. Following the session, we sat in the Celestial Room and visited quietly. It was a teary time and Becky expressed that she thought Daddy was probably sharing that experience with us. I agreed.

After changing out of our temple clothes we were leaving to go to SaraKay's car in the parking lot when a sweet gentleman approached us and asked if he could escort us to the car. I guess his quorum was on assignment that night to escort single sisters to their cars and although there were three of us and we weren't worried about the dark, we agreed and had a pleasant visit with him as we walked. He asked about our evening and we shared that it was a red-letter day for SaraKay to receive her endowments and that I had just flown in from Idaho Falls to share in the occasion. We mentioned that we wanted to go to dinner and ask if he could recommend a place. He told us of a good Mexican restaurant not far away and we decided to take his advice. We followed his instructions and were just ordering our meal when this same gentleman and his wife and daughter also came in for dinner. We chatted a moment and then went about our business. After a while he and his family left and soon we finished up and requested our tab. The waitress said that our meal was already paid for! She said the gentleman had picked up the tab before he left. We couldn't believe it! We didn't even know the fellow's name. It was certainly a sweet and kind gesture and one that left us surprised and humbled.

Friday night SaraKay joined us at Becky's for supper and we spent most of the evening working on all the missionary instructions that came in a huge packet to be filled out and followed. I guess visas going into Brazil are very complicated and the Church handles the details but only after we have jumped through many hoops such as transcripts, vehicle driving records, policeman's statement of non-criminal activity, notarized copies, authorization certificates, visa pictures, passport forms, and on and on. By the time we finished going over all the papers we were both pretty blurry-eyed and ready for bed!

Saturday morning Becky and I rallied the troops and we all washed some windows for a couple of hours. It was so fun working together with the kids and I was grateful that I could do something to lighten Becky's load now that she is heading into another big semester. I really appreciate Becky being a home away from home for SaraKay. It has already made such a difference and I know it will continue to be a blessing for her. Becky is so warm and welcoming and really went out of her way to make our stay there memorable. SaraKay has her ups and downs, but seems to be a little more encouraged with her teaching experiences and hopes that as she gets into it, she will start enjoying it. Right now it is so stressful and difficult that she isn't sure if she is ever going to enjoy it! One plus of her situation is that her singles' ward is quite established and so she is "the new kid on the block" and as such has been warmly welcomed into the fold. Next week she has been asked to speak on missionary work and she is also accompanying someone who is performing. I'm grateful that she is having these opportunities to get involved.

I think I mentioned in last week's letter that the spine specialist who met with Tim last week had hoped that he could solve the problem with Tim's back with alternate remedies but on Tuesday Tim went in for an MRI and the news wasn't so good. There are two discs that are badly damaged and protruding out from the vertebrae. He recommended trying steroid shots at first and that maybe that would relax the muscles around the

spine enough that the discs might slip back into place. He wasn't very encouraging as far as this procedure working but he felt like it was worth a try before surgery was recommended. So... Tim had his first steroid shot this morning. A coworker drove him to the hospital and drove him home a couple of hours later. Tim was on some pretty heavy medication and spent most of the day in bed. He hopes that he will be able to be back to work tomorrow. The doctor said that the shot should take effect in 3-5 days and that it will take time to know if surgery can be avoided or not. I know that Tim would appreciate everyone's prayers in his behalf. I'll keep you posted if there are any new developments.

August 28, 2011

I've had a sweet Sabbath and feel rejuvenated and ready to get into my week. Last night as I went to bed I opened the bedroom window so I could smell the wheat dust in the air and the earthy smell of the soil newly turned. As I drove home from Burley Thursday night there was a lingering haze in the air that turned the setting sun a brilliant red. The roads were busy with the big semis carrying their loads of wheat to the nearby grain elevators. The abundance of water and the rainy, cool spring produced a bumper crop of wheat this season and it's wonderful to see the "amber fields of grain" disappear beneath the header of the big combines. Even though I am now in the role of observer I still love this time of year and all the activity stirs thoughts of years gone by when our family was a part of the gathering. I can't help being a little nostalgic. I guess you can take me out of the harvest but you can't completely take the harvest out of me. I'm sure Uncle Gary has similar sentiments.

Some of you may have received Bethany's invitation to join her and Cameron in the Salt Lake Temple this Friday when they will be sealed. Because of my temple assignment and all the substitutes I have gotten the last two months, I am not going to be able to attend but I know that any of you who would be able to would be more than welcome. The time is 5:50 p.m. with the sealing at 6:20. I'm sure it will be a wonderful time for the Gentry's! That makes it 100% of all the children have been married in the temple! What a red-letter day for Scot and Jeanie.

I'm enjoying my time at the Family History library more all the time. Aside from all that I am learning, I have become friends with some wonderful people who are fun to be around as well as committed to the gospel. Last Tuesday I found some names on a line and I'm hoping to be able to submit their names and reserve them for our family to do.

Tim started on the steroid shots this past week and spent one day heavily medicated, feeling like a zombie. But the next day he was up and at work and his back is feeling better than it has felt in a long time. He still has discomfort but the doctor said that he is probably going to have some level of discomfort even with all the treatments and shots. It's a waiting game right now so continue to keep him in your prayers.

Wednesday I hosted a small lunch party for Marlene Acevedo. The new room that her husband built onto their home is complete and so we had a housewarming party and it turned out to be really nice. She now has a situation where she can easily get around in her wheelchair and has a lot more mobility than she previously had in her multi-level home. She was very appreciative of all of us making a fuss and it was fun to gather with friends for lunch and visit.

Following the party, I left for Burley to help Mike and Marci for a couple of days. Mike went back to work last week and also had three full nights of Church meetings and so I was grateful to be able to help out for a couple of days before Marci would be entirely on her own. She now can lift the baby but is still restricted from lifting Olivia. Tanner is one of the most contented babies I have ever seen. He just eats and sleeps. He is never fussy and seems oblivious to the activity of a young family swirling around him. What a blessing for Marci, especially until she gets on her feet a little more. It was nice to help out in their garden, too, and enjoy the fresh corn and beans and zucchini that are growing in abundance. Amber starts kindergarten this week so there is a lot of excitement with that on the horizon.

I signed up today to help at the Tiger Ear Booth next week. I still can hardly believe that we are at that time of year again. Where do the months go? Several of you have asked about my mission call. It still hasn't come but I'm learning that calling a senior missionary is different than with the young elders and sisters and several people have told me that their call took months to come. I'm grateful to catch my breath and have things calm down after a busy summer. SaraKay is surviving and has even had a few great days that give her hope that this experience may yet prove to be enjoyable. She spoke in church today,

was sustained as the "Preach My Gospel" teacher, and accompanied someone who performed a vocal solo. The bishopric member commented that all there was left was for her to give the closing prayer and the day would be complete. That got a good laugh. Best go. Love to all.

September 5, 2011

I'm home today enjoying the Labor Day holiday and just puttering around the house and yard. It seems like ages since I have had a "puttering day" and I'm excited to get done some of the things that I've put off for the last while. Fall is in the air and the Eastern Idaho State Fair in in full gear. I left on Saturday to go to Burley for Tanner's baby blessing and so I missed the parade and hubbub of the opening day but I'll be volunteering at the Tiger Ear Booth on Wednesday and probably take a while after my shift to walk around and see some of the exhibits. It's nice to not feel so tied to all that is going on and especially to not have all the pressure that used to be part and parcel of this week with all of Daddy's responsibilities.

The baby blessing was very sweet. Marci's folks and her sister, Tammy, and her family were also there and it was fun to get reacquainted with them. Mike gave Tanner a beautiful blessing and of course, the tears flowed as they usually do when I think about Daddy being absent from the circle. I don't know why I think that he is absent. Maybe he is as present as I am, just not as visible. Mike conducted the meeting and bore a very sweet testimony as did Marci and her mother. What a blessing for Tanner to be born into a family that has a tradition of testimony and faithfulness to the gospel. Following their meetings, we all joined together at the Larsen house for a delicious summer meal and pictures. It was such a pleasure and joy for me to be a part of their special day!

My assignment in the temple last week was satisfying. I assisted with the own endowment session and it was touching to see an older couple going through for the first time. The escort for the bride was a dear friend of hers and I could see in her face the loving concern that had probably motivated her to get her friend to the temple. The own endowment sister was nervous and unsure of things but hopefully her experience was a reassuring one. One of the sweetest things about serving in the temple is the experience of seeing the patrons in a divine light. As I serve them, I sometimes get a glimpse of them as the Lord sees them and it is humbling to walk and work among such wonderful saints. This experience always reassures me that if I try to do what's right, the Lord will cover my sins and weaknesses and continue to bring me along.

I thought about Bethany and Cameron being sealed on Friday night and would have loved to have been there for that occasion. There is nothing quite as beautiful and amazing as a temple sealing ceremony!

With the coming of fall the classes at the FH Center will be repeated and I am hoping to sit in on some of them and solidify my understanding of the software we use every day. I can't believe all the information that is available to us. I was telling Paul and Jenny last night that there are hundreds of tutorials on line at Family Search as well as others sponsored by the various software vendors such as RootMagic and Legacy. The world truly is turning to "the fathers" and making available all kinds of helps for those interested in Family History.

I need to close and get busy with things. Hope Becky and Tim arrive home safely today from their New York trip. SaraKay is doing better and is feeling like she might survive this experience although she hasn't reached the point yet of enjoying it. Steph has just completed her first week of teaching and Paul and Jenny's three oldest will all head out the door tomorrow for their first day of school. Laurel's great blog and recounting of their busy summer made me homesick for them...already! On a Sunday morning stroller ride Amber took me to visit the grounds of her elementary school and told me all about her first few days of kindergarten. Laurel and Katie are both enjoying BYU. Speaking of BYU Mike and Marci are now the proud owners of a new TV and Saturday afternoon we all watched as BYU eked out a win against Ole Miss! I wondered if Tim was watching the USA Open tennis tournament while he listened to the BYU game on the side. Probably. Josh and Rachel are both seniors this year...on the home stretch! And hopefully Shauntel's harried and hectic summer is over and she is able to reclaim her life and a little bit of down time.

September 11, 2011

It's a beautiful fall day outside. We've had a week of beautiful days, just what the Eastern Idaho State Fair committee ordered. I volunteered at the Tiger Ear Booth on Wednesday afternoon and enjoyed the chance to rub shoulders with several

of the scout professionals as well as the great volunteers that manned the booth. By the time my four-hour shift was over, I was tired and ready to go home. As I left the booth, I noticed one of the volunteers coming for the next shift who had worked for the scouts years ago, Travis Wyatt. At that time he was thirty-ish, unmarried, and not a member of the Church but he was a sweet fellow and many of the scout professionals took him under their wing and been good friends with him. Well, when he saw me, he asked if I had a minute to visit. He said that he regretted not coming by the house when Daddy died but he assured me that he had attended the funeral and had thought of Dad many times since his passing. He told me that he was now a member of the Church and had married a woman with four children and they now had one of their own, too. He laughed about how he was single for so long and that now he was a married man with a big family and active in the Church. We rejoiced together!

He then said that his association with the scouting professionals had definitely been a factor in his acceptance of the gospel. He asked if I remembered the experience that we shared canoeing on the String Lakes in Jackson Hole a few years ago. He had been in one canoe and Daddy and I had been in another, canoeing to meet up with the other two groups ahead of us. A large thunder cloud had come up over the Tetons and before we could get to the shore, we were engulfed in a horrific wind storm that nearly swamped both of our canoes. It was truly a terrifying experience as we attempted to keep our boats from capsizing in the foaming waves. Anyway, Travis said that that experience had left such an impression on him that he had determined to investigate the Church and did and eventually joined. What an interesting story. Who would have guessed that somehow in the midst of that storm Travis was being prepared for the gospel. I guess it just confirms that we should appreciate life as it happens, for good or ill, and recognize the Lord's hand in our lives.

As most of you already know, I received my mission call on Friday. I was at the temple most of the day and when I got the mail upon arriving home, there it was! I hurried into the house and tore open the letter and quickly scanned down through the cover letter to the location listed: Washington D.C. North for 18 months, entering the MTC in Provo on January 2nd. What exciting news! Of course, I then began calling you kids and SaraKay posted the news on her Facebook page. When I called Becky, Larsen answered and I told him that it was Grandma Susan and asked if his mother was there. He said that she was gone but that I could reach her on her cell phone. I told him that I had gotten my mission call and immediately he put the phone down and yelled at the top of his voice, "Tate, Cole, GRANDMA HAS HER MISSION CALL! I could hear Tate and Cole's excited responses and it warmed my heart! I so appreciate everyone's excitement and concern for me.

When I opened the envelope, it contained a booklet that gives the details of preparing for departure. As I scanned through it, I could see that it was very similar to the one we are working on for SaraKay. It contained information on insurances, medical exams, immunizations, and appropriate attire. There was one set of instructions that was not included in SaraKay's packet that was highlighted in mine: Traveler's Deep Venous Thrombosis (DVT). It was instruction for us to follow during our travel to prevent blood clots in our legs. I guess there are some differences in the young and the senior missionaries!

When I called, one of you kids said that I'd probably not sleep as well that night. I didn't believe you but you were right. I had a restless night, waking about 1:30 and again at four. I kept running through in my mind all the unknowns and wondering just what I would be doing and how I would get around, and what to pack, and what to buy to wear, and where was I going to get clothes that would work for a hot, humid East Coast summer, and on and on. Then I started worrying about the house and what needed to be done to leave it for 18 months and my mind was off racing again. Crazy! Well, I'm sure that these next few months will give me adequate time to solve these problems and enable me to be ready. I was especially grateful that I could be here for SaraKay's departure and Tim's surgery. I knew that if a call came that required me to leave early that I would probably accept it but I'm so happy that my loyalties didn't have to be divided. President Jenks emailed me and said that this assignment is the same one they wanted me for this month so I guess he convinced them to wait for me. I'm so happy about that because I would love to work with less actives and non-members and I'm assuming that is what this assignment is. I'll keep you posted on any further information.

I had a good visit with John this morning. He mentioned that Laurel has been called to be the YW District president and that will bring a new dimension to their lives. I think Jenny starts her early morning seminary responsibilities this week, too. Everyone seems to be settling in with school and the routines of lessons, etc. This weekend several of the family will be at the BYU-UTAH game. Josh, Mike, and Tim have big plans for it. Hopefully BYU will do better than they did yesterday against Texas. What a disappointing second half! On Thursday Lisa, Deniece, Kathy, Nate and Maureen are coming for a visit. We are going to visit, take some pictures of family historical sites in Shelley, and just have a great time together. Nate has a class reunion on Friday night and that's why we scheduled it for this weekend. What fun. We'll miss Charles but hopefully these sibling get-togethers will become a regular thing now that our lives are a little freer than they've been for many a year.

September 21, 2011

This past week was "the best of times" (spending the weekend with my siblings) and "the worst of times" (BYU getting trounced by the Utes!) I was just grateful that Kathy had returned to SLC by game time so we didn't have to listen to the game together! What a disappointing time!

Let's talk about the "best of times." On Thursday afternoon Kathy, Deniece, Lisa, Nathan and Maureen arrived for a sibling's time-out. Charles had prior commitments and couldn't come but we hope this will be an annual event and we'll give him more notice next time. As for the rest of us...we talked, ate, talked, and laughed our way through Thursday evening. Maybe I should say laughed and cried our way through. When we get together inevitably the conversation turns to days gone by and shared memories. Of course, with that reminiscing comes also the psycho-analyzing of what we experienced and its effect on us as we took on adulthood. This invariably brings more laughter and tears and a renewed appreciation for righteous parents and a rich heritage as well as a profound gratitude that none of us have to go out at 5:30 a.m. anymore and thin a couple acres of beets! Or freeze in the final days of spud harvest while we wield beet knives, top beets, and bag them for their trip to the sugar factory in Lincoln.

After a late lunch on Thursday, we all piled into the car (jowl to jowl and cheek to cheek, as Daddy would say) and drove to Shelley to take a drive down memory lane. We visited our three homes, schools, and drove out through the countryside to see our old stomping grounds. Along with this we took pictures for posterity and exchanged bits of news regarding our old friends and their lives' experiences. Upon arriving back here we had supper and continued to visit about life, family history projects, kids, jobs, trials, the Church, missions, and everything under the sun. I kept wondering how long we could visit if we actually had the time to keep it rolling. Probably for eternity. Anyway, "There's no friends like old friends" and these family members are truly my oldest and dearest friends! Although it wasn't ever mentioned I felt like they were throwing a going away party for me before my departure on my mission. I so love them and appreciate their efforts to strengthen me in this newest assignment.

When Kathy arrived, she brought with her a bag full of wonderful, conservative mission clothes as well as two pairs of great missionary shoes complete with comfortable jelly inserts so that when I'm out and about I'll be both comfortable as well as stylish. I tried on all the clothes and then we went through my closet and she and Deniece gave me lots of advice on my wardrobe. It felt like we were a bunch of teenage girls out shopping together. What fun! Since Kathy was in the office during her mission to Alaska, she had all kinds of good tips for me and was able to answer a lot of the questions I had.

On Wednesday I received a form letter from the mission with instructions about driving to the MTC and the mission. I had put on my mission papers that I would not be bringing my car and this information made me question whether it was even an option. Well, I called the Washington D.C. mission office and visited with Sister Doogle about transportation and she said that President Matsumori was in meetings all day but that she would get an answer for me and call me later. Thursday night before going to bed I checked my phone messages and there was a short message from President Matsumori welcoming me to the mission and giving me his two phone numbers so that I could call him on Friday. Friday after my shift at the temple I called him and we had a very congenial chat about my call and what my responsibilities would entail. He said that I would be one of four single senior missionary sisters called to an outreach program to the less-active and non-member single sisters in the area. We will meet the needs of these sisters in teaching them homemaking skills, job

skills, child care instruction, food preparation, and any other information that will help them become self-sufficient. We will attend ward councils and work with the ward and stakes and young missionaries to touch the lives and invite these single sisters to make the gospel a part of their lives. One day a week I will work either in the family history library or temple. In December I will work exclusively on the temple grounds as a tour guide during their annual celebration, "The Festival of Lights." Once a month the senior missionaries tour American history sites on a day trip and he promised that I would love all the wonderful perks of living in the nation's capital, especially during an election year. He also told me the name and phone number of my companion, Sister Bernadette Wege, and encouraged me to call her. She will enter the MTC the end of October and precede me into the field by two months. A two-bedroom apartment is provided for us and it sounds like we will work our entire mission in the same area. President Matsumori was so sweet and encouraging and it was great to learn these things about the mission and my responsibilities.

Back to our time-out…On Friday Kathy, Deniece and Lisa met me after my shift at the temple and we enjoyed dinner at the Olive Garden. Nate and Maureen had to be back to Washington so they left about noon for that drive. Friday night us sisters sat in the records room (the back bedroom with all of the binders that Grandma Ilene gave me before her passing), and we went through several drawers of papers, memorabilia, and other keepsakes. We found more pictures from their time in Pakistan and extensive folders full of transcripts of talks that Daddy gave on a variety of gospel subjects. We talked through what to do with their missionary journals from both their California mission as well as their one in Peru and made some decisions about putting together another book. We sorted through all kinds of photos, old letters and divided up memorabilia that mother kept from the grandchildren over the years. It was a wonderful project for us especially since it relieved me of the full responsibility of making those tough choices. Kathy offered to take much of what we wanted to save and to start preparing it for publication. One example of this was a letter from the Minister of Agriculture in Peshawar thanking Dad and Mom for their sweet association during their time there. It was signed by all of the Pakistani co-workers. There were several pictures that none of us had ever seen that we all felt needed to be included in the next family history project.

One sweet moment was when Deniece came upon a small bundle of papers in Grandpa Arch's handwriting. She started reading it aloud and it was a story of him returning late from some youth activity and of hearing his mother call out, "Arch is that you?" He always knew that despite the hour, his mother would never really go to sleep until every child was accounted for. It was so beautifully written and as Deniece read it we all shed a few tears. What a wonderful story of Daddy and Grandma Clara. It was so tender and gave us some insight into Daddy's family life that brought a smile. I really appreciate that my siblings are working with me to get these family history accounts into the hands of the extended family.

Saturday about noon Kathy and Deniece left and Lisa and I had the afternoon and Sunday morning to visit. Lisa has had many faith-promoting experiences since Riley was born and it was a treat to have her relate some of them to me. I'll share just one with you. Lisa said that ever since Riley arrived life has been demanding and exhausting. With the influx of providers, therapists, and other medical personnel she feels like she is in the midst of a constant whirlwind. Now that Riley is in school Lisa is back and forth all the time acting as an advocate and doing all she can for Riley to be included and be able to develop to her full potential. She said that each day she sees miracles that continue to bear witness to her that the Lord is aware. She told of how hard they have worked as a family to help Riley get potty trained. Although she is ten years old, they keep track of the hours each day and regularly put her on the toilet so that she will get the concept. This ritual has gone on for years but if Riley has taught the family anything it is to appreciate the small gains and not to become impatient or discouraged. Well, one day Lisa took Riley into the bathroom and sat her on the toilet. Lisa pulled up a little stool to sit on and interact with her while she went potty. It was during this very mundane and oft performed task that Lisa had a wonderful and warm feeling fully encompass her and she knew it was the Holy Ghost bearing witness to her of Riley's worth. It just came out of the blue but filled her with joy and again reminded her in the midst of this process that she is mother to a choice daughter of God! Lisa's faith continues to amaze and inspire me.

After dropping her off at the Idaho Falls airport on Sunday, I drove home thinking about how much strength and renewal I feel after being with my siblings. They are a great bunch and it is so fun to reconnect after so many years of raising our families and living apart.

P.S. I am going to Logan on Saturday to attend the Women's broadcast with Bonnie and Steph and then I will go with Steve to Josh VanFleet's farewell Sunday morning at 9:00 in Layton. I'm looking forward to another Larsen sibling get-together! By the way, it looks like SaraKay's and my farewell will be on December 18th at 1:00. Time is flying by.

September 27, 2011

(Sunday) I've been in Utah for most of the day, attending Josh Van Fleet's mission farewell. I drove to Hyde Park Saturday afternoon and Steph and Linds loaded me up with squash, cucumbers, and two big buckets of beautiful raspberries! They were hosting Josh's group for their Homecoming dinner before the dance and it was fun to share in their preparations. We walked out through their prolific garden and examined Linds's gazebo which should be completed before snow falls. It is positioned in a peaceful setting, perched on the hillside amid the greenery of the "wild place" behind their property. Before I left, Steph mentioned that the stake YW presidency that she has served in for the last five years was being released on Sunday. I'm sure it was a bit melancholy for her. They have really been a great presidency and had wonderful activities and programs for the YW of their stake. I'm sure this release will leave a void in Stephani's life for a while. She has truly eaten, slept, and drunk (is that the right tense for those three verbs?) YW for the last five years...and loved every minute of it!

I then drove to Steve and Bonnie's to visit and have Steve help me shop for a new phone. It felt good to have him at my side as we visited both T-Mobile and AT&T stores and talked through the possibilities. I have wanted to get this done but realized that it's going to be tricky since SaraKay is on my account and she will need her phone until she leaves so I'm not sure now is a good time to be making a switch. Anyway, Steve helped me walk through some of the plans and we've put the decision on hold for a while. Later Bonnie, Chrissy and I went to the Women's Conference and enjoyed sharing that experience together. What a beautiful session...especially President Uchtdorf's "Forget Me Not" comments. He touched on things that I needed to hear...I think we'll be hearing more about his wonderful counsel.

It was fun to relax with Steve and Bonnie later that evening and talk to the kids about all their activities and involvements. I feel like everyone is growing by leaps and bounds and getting taller by the day. When I first drove up, I thought how their home is getting lovelier and lovelier with all the landscaping that they are doing. Recently Steve and sons built a large raised bed for gardening in the back of their property and installed a decorative picket fence in the front. They, too, have been reaping the fruits of their gardening enterprise this summer and I left with a bag of Utah tomatoes that are going to be a delicious treat! I so appreciated their kindness and care for me during my brief visit.

It was sweet to have Steve, Rachel, Chrissy, Jared, and Anne Marie all go with me this morning to sacrament meeting in Layton, although it made for a very early morning since the sacrament meeting was at nine. We arrived a little early and sat in on a short practice for Josh and Jacob's musical number which included the guys that had roomed together at USU last year. It was beautifully done and very touching. Josh bore a strong testimony. I was touched with the goodness I saw in him. Karen and Jim were certainly proud parents. Later we joined the family for a delicious meal at their home. It was a treat to get to see Maren and Brock and their three little ones, Gary and Linda, Rick and Terry, and Staff and Kaye. There were lots of Jim's side of the family, too, and plenty of Josh's friends and acquaintances. These are truly times of rejoicing! Josh will be an asset in his mission and such a great missionary!

Following the dinner, we left for Brigham City where I parted ways with the Larsen's of Wellsville and headed home. It was such a beautiful fall day and the drive home gave me opportunity to contemplate about this wonderful world and all the Lord's tender mercies to our extended family. I am so grateful for each one of you and your kind consideration of me.

(Tuesday) Couple of news items: Tim is going in for his back surgery on October 12th in Boise. I am planning to drive over on the 11th and be there for the surgery. If all goes well, he will be home on the 13th. The doctor said that he should be walking (slowly) within a couple of days and able to pretty much be on his own. I'll help when and where I'm needed. I'm hoping to use Dave

and Andrea's as my home base and get in some time with their family before returning home. The doctor has been very optimistic about Tim's full recovery. I know that Tim would appreciate everyone's prayers in his behalf.

SaraKay had a scary thing happen. Someone broke into the house where she is staying and rifled through all the bedrooms and stole computers, jewelry, other electronic devices, her camera, her jewelry box with an extra pair of car keys as well as her jewelry. She was the first one on the scene and it was very unnerving and disheartening to see all that was stolen. The police were called and an investigation is under way but most petty thieves never get caught so the girls in the apartment aren't very hopeful of seeing their items again. The good news was that the thief didn't take her violin that was in her closet. Thank goodness! It was the most expensive thing in the house that could have been easily removed but somehow the thief didn't realize that and left it untouched. We are so grateful! Today the landlord installed a security system. Hopefully it will solve the problem.

Last night at our FH Center zone conference our leadership was reorganized and there are lots of changes on the horizon. Everyone was full of speculation today about upcoming changes. I'm feeling a little like an outsider since my days there are numbered. I've made some great friends and I know I'll miss the missionaries who have become very dear to me. They are all kind and good and have been excited for me and my upcoming mission. Transitions have always been hard for me!

I am going to be flying to Mesa the week of Thanksgiving to bring SaraKay home. Her student teaching commitment will be completed that week and I'm going to drive home with her. She will be staying with Becky the month of November to help with lowering her expenses so she can have what she needs to get out on her mission. Hopefully this will be a mutually beneficial arrangement for both parties. I hope this won't leave anyone high and dry for Thanksgiving. I'm starting to feel the pressure of all that we've got to get done, especially in regards to SaraKay's preparations.

October 4, 2011

I've had a wonderful weekend listening to conference and enjoying Mike and Marci and their little ones. They arrived about the time I got home from my temple assignment Friday evening, pizza in hand. It has been such a pleasure to kick back, cuddle their new baby, listen to conference, and just relax. The weather has been so beautiful and their three girls have enjoyed the sunshine, the trampoline, and the swings. During the sessions they played with puzzles, Legos, wooden blocks, and Mike's iPad. It put me in mind of conferences past (minus the iPad) and our family gathered around the TV enjoying the talks and just being together. Conference was truly inspiring! Isn't it wonderful to be led by prophets and to feel their concern and love for each of us.

Life is moving forward at an alarming pace. I have been chipping away at all I need to do to be ready to leave house and home for 18 months. It frequently dictates my daily activities and even intrudes on my dreams at night. There are just so many details! I feel like I am shutting down one life and picking up another. I am not renewing my Church News, Morning News, National Geographic, AARP Membership, AAA Auto membership, and will be canceling my auto insurance. I'll finish up at the FH Center in November and at the temple in mid-November. I'm preparing lists of monthly tasks that my neighbors are going to help me with and trying to secure things around the house and yard. I'm feeling some separation anxiety but know that this is normal and needs to just be pushed through.

SaraKay has been so involved with her responsibilities at school that the reality of leaving hasn't hit her yet. Once she finishes her commitment in Mesa she will probably go through some anxiety, too. It will be good to get her home. This week is a big concert and her choir is performing several pieces, one with choreography. She has the jitters and will be grateful to have Tuesday over and some of the stress gone. Thanks to Becky for providing her with a performance dress and shoes. I've really been grateful that SaraKay has had a touch of home at Becky's. It's been a life saver.

October 9, 2011

The rainy, cold weather that was forecast for last week arrived on Wednesday and stayed around for most of last week. Although I'm not ready for winter to arrive yet, the rain gave me a good excuse to stay indoors and address other things that need doing. Tuesday Bruce Ellis called to see if I needed help picking my apples. He watered the horse and noticed how heavy laden my two apple trees were and offered his 11-year-old scouts for the project. I told him that I was waiting

for a good, solid frost before I picked them since people tell me that the frost will set the sugars in the apple and it will be a tastier apple. Well, we agreed that the scouts would come this Tuesday and help me so that was a big relief and will also enable me to distribute some of the apples since I'm not doing any canning or drying this year. I appreciate Bruce's watch care over me. I have wonderful neighbors!

I continue to pick away at my list of "to do's" for my departure. It is unbelievable how quickly the time is flying. SaraKay had a major concert last week and then had an early release on Friday. The schools in the area are on a break right now and she has the next week off for fall vacation. She and her roommates left on Friday to go to the Flagstaff area and spend some time with her roommate's family. They were going to do some hiking and other fun activities and drive home this morning so that they could catch their 1:00 meetings. She was pretty excited to get to see some of the Arizona recreational areas and escape her apartment and work for a few days. She'll be spending part of this next week at Becky's before returning to her teaching. She's on the downhill run from here on out since these next few weeks she will be assisting instead of being in charge.

Yesterday was our yearly summer party for our temple group and it was a nice buffet and program at a stake center in Pocatello. It was fun to meet my temple friends in a more casual setting and to see what they look like in color. It's interesting when you only see each other in white to finally get a feel for people in a more normal setting. I'm realizing that the next few weeks will be my last with many of these people and they are truly a fine bunch of friends who I have grown to love and respect. I have extended my circle of friends considerably these last two years with my work at the temple and FH Center.

Last evening Ima Hale and I attended the state Jr. Miss program in Idaho Falls. Zac Hansen's little sister, Hannah, competed as Snake River High's representative and her mother, Peggy, has been such a dear friend that I felt I needed to be supportive of Hannah. I invited Ima to go with me since her daughter, Kwani, was also a Jr. Miss and I've been wanting to visit with her. It was a gala affair and fun to attend. Hannah qualified for the top ten and did a wonderful job although she didn't place. Ima and I went to dinner before the performance and then visited for a long time afterwards enroute home and sitting in the driveway. She lost her husband, Mark, about 18 months ago and has had a pretty tough time dealing with the aftermath. Her husband was self-employed and part of the trauma of losing him was dealing with all the business interests and clients and even finding the passwords for his various computers. She has struggled with bouts of depression and it has been a rocky ride.

She bore strong witness to me of the Lord's watch care over her through these bouts and of tender mercies that continue to bear witness to her that her smallest needs are being met. She has had certain people come into her life that have been an answer and have kept her from sinking with the weight of her load. She told of a time when she felt that she had lost her identity as a person and that her life had lost direction and purpose. She received a phone call from a fellow who had taught her parents the gospel (she is an American Indian from New Mexico) and had known Ima when she was still a child. This missionary just happened to be one of our friends when Daddy and I were students at Ricks College so this story was especially meaningful to me. He invited her to his home (he lost his wife about five years ago) and showed her his Indian room in his house. He had various Indian handicrafts that had been given to him on his mission and that he had kept all these years. He presented her with a beautiful vase that Ima's mother had given him at the conclusion of his mission and as she took it in her hands, she had opened to her vision a picture of her mother sitting at the pottery wheel, smiling and gently caressing the lump of clay. Ima saw herself as a little girl playing around the room and in that short moment, she became aware of her childhood years, of her mother's love, and of her rich heritage. The second thing that Kent put into her hands was a silver watchband that her father's best friend had created for him. Again for a few seconds Ima saw her father and his friend standing together, laughing and working on the beautiful silver band, and in that instant Ima connected with her father who has been gone for many years. Although these visions lasted only a few seconds and Kent was really not even aware of what was happening, the message for Ima was clear. She was a child of God who had a rich heritage of Indian blood and parents who loved her then as a child and loved her still and were aware of her and her struggles.

This experience truly transformed Ima and gave her something to hang on to. Although life is still difficult, she said that she feels that the worst is

behind her and that she is going to be able to move forward in confidence. What a beautiful story. Another thing that she mentioned was that her healing has come through her relationship with the Savior and not through experiences with her husband, Mark, since his passing. We shared accounts of other tender mercies and had a rich spiritual experience together. The whole evening was healing for us both and reaffirmed again my oft thought fact that I live among angels in this part of the Lord's vineyard.

This week I am leaving on Tuesday to go to Boise. I will make a quick stop at Mike and Marci's and then continue on arriving at Dave and Andrea's later that evening. Wednesday morning Tim will check in at the hospital for his back surgery at noon. I know that he would appreciate everyone's faith and prayers. I am going to make it the focus of my fast today and invite all of you to include him in your fast today if that is possible. I will keep everyone posted by email. The doctor has every confidence that the surgery will go well, but I always feel better when I know the "Master Healer" is also watching over. I'll keep touch. Have a sweet sabbath.

October 20, 2011

(Monday) I'm home tonight and have spent the last couple of hours sorting through apples, reading my mail and email, and quickly perusing and tossing last week's newspapers. The 11-year-old scouts picked my apples for a service project and I arrived home to three large boxes full of apples and my huge red wheel barrel filled to overflowing. Normally I would make sauce, dry a bunch, and spend a day making pies to freeze but my quest this year is to liquidate my food storage not add to it so I spent a while on the phone and was able to get some of them gone. I hate to see things go to waste. Just being out delivering apples tonight put me out in the fall weather and I couldn't help but feel a little nostalgic that this fall season is nearly over and I've missed all the gathering and harvesting that usually occupies my days this time of year. I've been surprised how hard it has been for me to let go of "fall" things and focus on my upcoming departure. I keep reminding myself that I need to dedicate myself to the task at hand but occasionally I find myself lingering in the past and that is just too painful to do. Enough of that.

Last Tuesday I left for Boise about ten and dropped by to have lunch with Marci and the kids. Mike was in Vegas to a dental convention and Marci had been holding down the fort alone since Sunday night. That is no small task with their four young children and my heart went out to her. We had an enjoyable but short visit and I continued on my way. David and Andrea invited Tim and me for dinner that evening and then Dave and his friend who serves in the bishopric with him gave Tim a blessing. It was a beautiful blessing and I was grateful for Tim's request and David's worthiness. Tim left soon thereafter and I had a sweet visit with Dave and Andrea and their busy bunch. They are at that stage of heavy demands on their time and resources. Anna Sue was preparing to leave for a choir retreat and Joseph was packing for a scout camp out on Friday. Chantelle was one of three nominees for her choir president and she was preparing a campaign speech and all the kids were dealing with homework and the demands of school. I was reminded again of how busy their lives are and I so appreciated their accommodating me for the time I was there for Tim.

Wednesday morning I picked up Tim and we drove to the St Alphonsus Hospital in Boise for the surgery which was scheduled for 11:15. I sat in the waiting room and began catching up on some of the bookwork I brought to help pass the time. Soon the receptionist paged me and told me that Tim requested that I come visit him since his surgery wouldn't be for a while. Well, they weren't kidding about "for a while." It turned out that he wasn't operated on until 1:30! Although it was a wonderful opportunity for Tim and me to have some one-on-one time together, this visiting time against the backdrop of the impending surgery wasn't ideal and it seemed like the time dragged by. Finally they came for him and I returned to the waiting room. It was nearly two hours later that I was paged again and went to Tim's assigned room to await his arrival.

He was told at his last appointment that depending on several variables and the best-case scenario, there was a possibility that he could be released on Thursday. Tim is in such good shape from his tennis activities that we were optimistic that his recovery would be speedy. When he arrived to his room from surgery he was in a lot of pain and miserable. I was so grateful to be there with him. At that point in time Tim seriously doubted that he would be anywhere near ready to be released the next day and wondered if he would ever feel good again. He had been fasting before the surgery and was hungry but every time he tried to eat anything he got nauseated and

threatened to lose it so it was several more hours before he could keep anything down.

Later that evening I left for Dave's and Andrea's and Tim settled in for the night. The next morning I arrived at about 9:00 at the hospital and Tim told me that he hadn't slept well and that he had finally gotten to sleep about 3:00 a.m. only to be awakened a while later by two nurses who insisted that he get up and go for a short walk. Although that was the last thing that he wanted to do, he admitted that it had helped and he later was able to eat a good breakfast and keep it down. Although on Wednesday he had felt terrible, by about 10:00 on Thursday he was able to get up and walk unassisted and was feeling encouraged. It was about that time that I received a text from Mike informing us that Marci had been deathly sick for several hours in the night and finally had called Mike in Vegas. He made some phone calls and lined up someone to help with the kids and to take her to the hospital. She was diagnosed with appendicitis and scheduled for surgery later that afternoon. In the meantime, Mike caught an early flight out and headed for home. When I received the text, I called their home and reached a ward member who was there managing the home front awaiting Mike's return. What a strange turn of events for Marci who just recovered from her C-section and now was facing another surgery.

By Thursday afternoon Tim felt like he would be okay and the doctor gave permission for him to go home. I spent that day with him and helped him get situated at home and down for the night before I left him in the care of his roommates. Friday morning I spent several hours with him and tried to help out with what I could. Tim was still feeling pretty punk but I had to remind him that he had just had major surgery and should cut himself some slack as far as his recovery time went. Tim was supposed to continue taking walks to aid with the healing so we strolled a short distance to a neighborhood walking path and enjoyed the beautiful fall weather as we visited. He was so appreciative of my help but also mentioned that he would be okay if I needed to help out in Burley with Mike and Marci's situation. Dave and Andrea planned to visit Tim on Friday night and bring dinner so Tim felt like he would have someone there that evening to help out and that I should leave for Burley. When I talked it through with Dave and Andrea, Andrea suggested that after supper I leave and that David could take supper to Tim and help him get showered since he needed help dressing the wound. Anyway, I left for Burley early evening and Dave was able to help out with Tim.

When I arrived in Burley Marci had just arrived home from the hospital a couple of hours earlier. I was grateful to be able to help out and especially appreciated Tim and Dave and Andrea doing all they did to make it possible. Marci had had surgery less than 24 hours before and was in a lot of pain. Mike and I worked together to try to meet the needs of their three little girls as well as keep Tanner fed and dry. The kids were a little on edge not understanding why mom was unavailable to them. No one is so needed as a young mother and I sensed that keenly as Mike and I tried to fill Marci's big mothering shoes. Mike had a funeral on Saturday to conduct and meetings for most of Sunday but when he was home, he was a hands-on dad and between the two of us we managed to keep things on a fairly even keel.

In the midst of all of this was little Tanner who is growing like a weed and quick to respond and smile at the least provocation. His contented personality and ability to "roll with the punches" of three active sisters continued to be a bright spot in the events of the previous days. Frequent phone calls to Tim kept me informed of his progress and although he had a couple days of feeling down, by Sunday afternoon he was strengthening and Monday he spent the day at work. He reported on Tuesday that he was already noticing improvement in his ability to stand and walk and was very encouraged with getting relief from the pain he has dealt with the last two years.

Monday afternoon I left for home and Marci's mom, Karen, arrived from Utah to help out. When I called yesterday to wish Mike happy birthday Karen said that Marci is feeling much better and improving. What a blessing! The doctors told her that the recovery from this surgery should be easier than from her C-section but key to her recovery is that she not lift anything more than 15 pounds…a nearly impossible task for a mother with toddlers. She and Mike are taking it a day at a time and working through the situation. Sunday morning when Mike was getting ready to leave for his meetings, Amber gave him a kiss goodbye and as she walked away from him she cried out in pain. She had brushed against his belt buckle and caught her hair in it. Mike worked to get it loose and I inquired what had happened. When he related that she had caught her hair in his

buckle I commented that that was a rather unexpected occurrence and he said, "Why should I be surprised? Lately if it can go wrong, it will!" Sometimes we feel like that about our lives. I'm sure you can relate.

I need to close. I've come down with a bad cold and am fighting to get it under control so that I can fill my temple assignment tomorrow. Steph will be arriving tomorrow evening and we are going to go shopping on Saturday for some missionary essentials. Hopefully I will feel good enough to enjoy it. I really appreciate her taking her weekend to help me. She called the other day to say that Josh was chosen as a Sterling Scholar in the Social Sciences department at the high school and also was notified that he is a semi-finalist in the National Merit Scholarship competition. He is qualified for the Monson Scholarship at BYU and is running them all ragged with his involvements. I thought to myself that it's only fair since Stephani ran Dad and I ragged with all her involvements her senior year! See...what goes around comes around! (It's a sweet ragged, though) I know that Rachel is in the throes of applying for college and scholarships and is planning to attend the BYU-I nursing program. She is following in the footsteps of her Aunt Shannon, Grandma Jean, great Grandma Johnson, as well as her great aunt Cecelia. After what our family has been through the past week, we can all testify what a noble profession nursing is!!!

October 25, 2011

It's early Tuesday morning and I gave up trying to sleep and decided to get up and into my day. I'm not going to the FH Center today. This cold that I got last week has worsened to the point that I went to the doctor yesterday and was told that I have a very bad sinus infection that needs to be taken care of so it doesn't get away from me and become chronic. At least I got some answers and some potent antibiotics that hopefully will help me fight it off. I was thinking the other day that I haven't been really sick since before Daddy died and after this episode, I appreciate even more the good health I usually enjoy.

A couple of weeks ago Stephani called and I commented that I was feeling overwhelmed with life and all I needed to get done in preparation for my mission. She offered to come and take me shopping and help me with those decisions. That was a wonderful offer since I have a difficult time finding time to shop and yet I know that I need to have some new clothes so that I can feel good about how I look. So...Stephani arrived Friday night just a few minutes after I got home from the temple. She came with a big bag of delicious hot soup, a loaf of Parmesan bread, a canister of apple cider mix, and lots of medications and home remedies that she and Linds put together for me. She heated up the soup and we sat together and just enjoyed the chance to visit. I was feeling so sick on Friday that I wasn't sure that I get through my shift but I knew I wanted to go shopping on Saturday and that I wouldn't feel right about it if I hadn't fulfilled my temple assignment Friday. After supper, Steph was rarin' to go as far as getting organized, making lists, talking through upcoming events, and looking through my closet at what I presently had that would work for my mission. I was so sick that I just laid on the love seat in the office while she made lists of where we would go and what we would buy, etc. She then updated the family directory and birthday lists and did some other computer work for me. I just laid there on the sofa, wrapped in a warm blanket and feeling secure and warm. Even though I was under the weather, the evening was so pleasant and fun and just "what the doctor ordered."

Saturday morning our plan was to be in Idaho Falls when the mall opened. Stephani was talking with me about luggage and we decided to go down to the storage room and look at what we have already. I knew that I had one huge gray suitcase that was fairly new and hoped that it might work. As we went into the second storage room we were met with a distressing sight. The copper tubing on the top of the water heater was cracked and was squirting water all over! Stephani immediately discovered what was wrong and we began moving everything away from the water heater as well as moving things out of the water that was pooled on about half of the storage room floor. What a mess! Steph sent me upstairs to get some duct tape and on the way I phoned Larry Turpin, my plumber. He was so kind and sweet and offered to come right over even though it was a Saturday morning. In the meantime, Stephani and I removed the water soaked items into the family room and Stephani mopped up the floor, pushing the water toward the drain that we opened. By the time Larry arrived, we were ready for him. He quite quickly replaced the two bendable copper pipes and then checked the water heater in the furnace room to make sure that it wasn't leaking. He talked through with me all that I needed to do to get the house ready for my departure and I made an

appointment on December 31st to have him come and help me get everything set so that we wouldn't have problems during the time I'm gone.

By 10:00 we were on our way to Idaho Falls despite the plumbing problems. I kept thinking how upsetting it would have been if I had been here alone when it happened or if I hadn't checked the storage room. The water could have been squirting for days and damaged more than it did. Tender Mercy!

Although our day got off to a terrible start, we literally shopped until we dropped. We just went from store to store, conferring, and trying on outfits. Stephani was the "go to girl" as I did my best to keep up with her in the dressing room. The whole experience seemed reminiscent of days gone by. Remember those shopping trips that I would take with you kids when you got your harvest paycheck? I would put you in a dressing room and bring you armfuls of clothes to try on and you would complain about having to try things on and that you didn't want to buy out the store and then you would accuse me of enjoying spending your money! Sound familiar? Stephani kept me in the dressing room trying things on and I told her that I thought she was having way too much fun spending MY money! She couldn't deny it. But…seven hours later we had purchased just about everything I will need for D.C. including a large purse that is built to hold a laptop computer! One thing that Stephani was determined to buy was a set of luggage. I kept telling her that the gray one at home and the new carry on would work but she wasn't to be talked out of it. Finally, I agreed to the purchase and later I told her that I suspected her siblings had given her the instructions that she was to persist until I found a luggage set. I know none of you kids want their mother going into the MTC with ratty luggage. So there! I took the plunge and now have a closet full of classy clothes and a wonderful set of new luggage!

Stephani kept worrying about how I was feeling but I assured her that there wasn't anything she could do for me that I needed more than that shopping trip. It has been so nice to know that I am nearly ready and that SaraKay can be the focus of attention when she arrives home after Thanksgiving. Stephani left for home about 8:00 Saturday night and I carefully put my new things away. I went to bed early thinking that I might be able to attend my meetings on Sunday but I slept fitfully and hacked my way through the night. Sunday morning I decided to have a quiet day at home and take care of myself. Steve and Nate and Jared spent the weekend in Idaho Falls helping the Bensons with some yard work and called to say that they would stop by enroute home on Sunday afternoon. I stuck a pan of lasagna in the oven and used the other half of Steph's parmesan bread for an easy meal. Earlier that morning I called and asked Steve if he would give me a blessing when he came. He agreed and I called my home teacher, Nic Barnard, and asked him to assist. It was very reassuring to have Steve's hands on my head and to listen to his blessing and instructions. I so appreciated that he was here for me and that everything seemed to fall into place perfectly for me all weekend.

One thing that Steve counseled me was to not run faster than I am able. I know that was good counsel. Yesterday I didn't go to the FH Center and I went to the doctor's instead and got some good help. I'm still hacking away and dealing with lots of phlegm but hopefully the antibiotic will kick in and I'll feel better soon. My last day at the temple is Friday and I would hate to miss it but I know I can't expose patrons to this stuff so I'll see how it goes. Today I'm going to do some computer work. I wish I could go outside and get some winterizing done in the yard but this cold would only get worse if I spent the day outside.

Both Tim and Marci seem to be doing well. Tim has been amazed at how good he is feeling. He is overjoyed that the pain is gone and that he can move with more freedom than he has for several years. Marci returned with her mother to Utah on Thursday and Mike joined them on Friday. Karen offered to keep Ellie and Olivia this week and give Marci a few more days of help before the full weight of the load descends on her. She is recovering nicely and was given permission to lift Tanner since he is under the 15-pound limit allowed. I'm grateful for the Lord's tender watch care over our family and for each of you and your goodness.

October 30, 2011

It's another beautiful, chilly fall day today. Although the skies are clear and the sun is shining, there's frost on the rooftops of my neighbors' homes so I know its chilly. We've had more than our share of wonderful fall days but I keep hoping that this weather will hold until I get my place winterized and ready for the months ahead. I've spent most of the past week housebound, trying to keep out of the cold air and give myself time to recover from this cold I have

been battling. I missed Church last Sunday and stayed close to home on both Monday and Tuesday trying to give myself every chance to improve. Despite the antibiotics I've been on I've been surprised at how long it has taken for me to feel better. My goal was to go to the temple on Friday and say my good-byes so I took it easy for most of the week with that in mind. It was hard to see the week come and go and not be able to do the yard work I needed to do, but finally yesterday afternoon I bundled up and spent some time in my flower bed, clearing away the old and working the soil for another season. Of course, the next season I will be gone so I was especially anxious to have it cleared off and looking good before winter sets in.

On Friday I put in my last assignment at the temple. I knew that it was going to be an emotional day for me. These ladies I work with are some of the most Christ-like I have ever met and I'll miss having their wonderful influence in my life. Although I had tried to keep my departure quiet, the word was out and throughout the day I had lots of sweet sisters approach me with good-byes and well wishes. I tried to keep my equilibrium and not get too weepy but it was a lost cause. I was grateful when my shift was over and I could quit saying good-bye. I suspect that when I return from my mission that I will have another opportunity to serve again. I hope so. Being a temple worker is pure joy!

Tomorrow will be my last day at the Center and more goodbyes there. Sharen and I are going to buy a bunch of donuts and cider and provide a going away treat for the missionaries there. Two weeks ago someone provided cinnamon rolls as a good-bye for us but we thought it would be fun for us to turn the tables on everyone else. Besides, we haven't been there very long and we've feeling a little sheepish about all the fuss they are making about us. Sharen and I were commenting the other day about the wonderful quality of people that we work with at the Center. They are so dedicated, strong, and faithful. It is a joy to rub shoulders with them. I have decided through my work both at the Center and at the temple that an individual that lives the gospel and gives service will become Christlike. It's inevitable. And all these people I work with are very distinct and unique in their own way but they all have this wonderful goodness about them that is so exemplary!

Dion Gooch Ostegar Munson passed away last week and Friday night I attended her viewing and visited with several of her children who have been my acquaintances over the years. Dion's father, Joseph Gooch, married my grandma, Abby K. Johnson Kendrick Robinson Gooch, when they were in their sixties. I wrote some about their courtship and marriage in Volume 1 and many of you have read the book John published about Abby's life. When I was a little girl Grandma Gooch was married to Joe and his daughter, Dion, and her family lived in a small home on 100 North down towards the West Stake Center. Dion's husband was deaf and was called Swede. He was the custodian of the Blackfoot Tabernacle (Hawker Funeral Home) during the years that Allan served in the stake presidency and when most of the Blackfoot area was included in one stake instead of five like it is now. Swede was a great guy although I remember being uncomfortable around him because he spoke loudly and I didn't quite know how to interact with him. Their home was so tiny and the things of the world in short supply. As I grew older and left home my ties with the family faded and it wasn't until Daddy and I moved back to the area that I once again became aware of them. In fact, the oldest daughter, Judy, was my counselor in the stake primary presidency and we were very close through those years. The oldest son, Allan, has been very prominent in Church circles and has served both as the head of the Provo and Brazilian MTC for years. The daughter Carol has been a friend throughout the years and Joseph and Gay, the youngest two both have lived in this area for many years and I've known and admired them, too. I have been aware of their families and their challenges including cancer, car accidents, the death of two siblings as well as several grandchildren, divorce, and other trials that I feel that I have been "a fly on the wall" as I have watched Dion navigate through the years, staying firm in her testimony and devotion to the gospel. I learned from her daughter, Gay, that Dion was only three when her mother passed away and that her father, Joe, raised all eight children on his own. It's hard to imagine the difficulties that they all endured during those years but especially poignant to think of Dion without a mother. I guess I bring up these things because I couldn't help feeling the goodness of the extended family as they gathered to honor their grandmother (to 30+), great grandmother to 131 children, and great great grandmother to several more. What a joy to reconnect with this family and to see that the many trials and challenges that they have faced have only strengthened and refined them and they have and

are continuing to live productive and successful lives of commitment and faithfulness. I was reminded that life can get difficult but all that is required of us is to keep on and hold to our covenants.

I am going to close. No new news from the siblings except the good news that both Tim and Marci are definitely on the mend and able to resume most of their normal activities. The weeks fly by. The holidays will be here before we know it.

November 6, 2011

I have had a productive week, focusing on the details of my departure and tying up loose ends. It is a luxury to have my time to think through the upcoming months and preparations. I even got some yard work done and am feeling like I'm about ready for winter. We've had a few snow flurries but nothing that has stuck yet, but it feels good to have a cozy and warm home to protect me from the elements.

Last night Ima Hale and I attended the Snake River Fine Arts concert, "Vocal Point," the BYU Men's group that is presently competing on the TV show "Sing Off" on Monday nights. They have performed for several shows and are in the final six groups still in the competition. It was standing room only in the Snake River High School auditorium and the crowd was loud and responsive. What a fun evening! This is the second time the Fine Arts officers have brought in a well-known group for their annual fundraiser and it was fun to attend and be out in the community. It really makes me realize, though, how removed I am from much of what goes on in this community. They announced before the show that Snake River had just defeated Salmon in the football playoffs in Holt Arena and will advance to the state championship game. Our sports teams have done very well this year winning state in boys' cross country, girls volleyball, boys soccer, and now playing for the championship in football!

I have been in touch with Laurel this week and am fasting today for her mother, Marilyn. Hopefully all of you received my email about her mother being diagnosed with uterine cancer. She had major surgery Wednesday morning which lasted for over five hours but the doctors were encouraged and hoped that they were able to get it all. The family is optimistic and Laurel is staying close to the situation. Her father and two of her sisters were able to be there for the surgery and Marilyn was expected to be home towards the end of this week. Of course her recovery from such an extensive surgery will take a while but the news was good. She appreciates our prayers and fasting in her behalf. Of course, it is difficult for Laurel to be so far away at a time like this but her mother continues to reassure her that things are going well. Keep Marilyn and Laurel in your prayers.

I received a sweet phone call from my missionary companion who has been in the field for two weeks now and is settling in. She said she has been involved all week at the Washington D.C Visitor's Center with arrangements for the upcoming Christmas season. It sounds like she is having a great time and she called to fill me in on our apartment and the situation. She said that there is a green belt that runs right by our building and that she and a couple missionary who just arrived went for a pleasant walk one evening and got acquainted. Sister Wege sounds like a lovely lady and her phone call got me excited for the weeks ahead.

I have said this before but let me reaffirm my schedule for the end of November. I will fly to Mesa on November 17th and stay at Becky's. She will be in China on a business trip as well as to meet someone that she has been communicating with for several weeks. He is a close friend of John and Laurel's whose wife passed away about 18 months ago from an aneurysm. Becky's boss offered to give her some contacts in Shanghai so she could do business along with pleasure and get her costs covered so that is what she is doing. I will be there for SaraKay's final days of student teaching and even get to attend the final concert. She will finish up on Friday the 18th. We will take care of the home front and do some mission shopping during the days while the kids are at school. Becky will arrive home on Wednesday and we'll have Thanksgiving with her. Early Friday morning we will drive back, hopefully without any weather problems, and SaraKay will start working at Kesler's either on Saturday or Monday. McKay Kesler thought that he could use her and she is anxious to get some money coming in to help out with mission expenses. It will be a harried trip but I haven't wanted her driving it alone so this all worked out for the best.

November 14, 2011

This past week was somewhat of a whirlwind culminating in a fun weekend spent with friends and family. One of the things that I have been concerned about doing before I get into the holiday rush was to have my neighbors over for

dinner and then talk through the things that they will be doing to help with the house, yard, and pasture during the time that I am on my mission. I never enjoy entertaining but I felt that I wanted to do this as a token of appreciation to them for helping out. After talking with several of them, we determined that probably Sunday would be the best day for the get-together so I invited them to join me for dinner at 1:00 following our stake conference session that morning. I spent quite a bit of time throughout the week preparing and planning for the meal and got some pecan logs made so that I could give them each one and know that that was also taken care of before I got into the throes of all the December activities. I invited the Hannis, the Ellises, and the Youngs. I could tell that Brent and Shelley were a little hesitant but I went ahead anyway and they accepted. We had a truly delightful time together and also went over the schedule of things to be done and who would do it. They are all being so good to me in assuming these duties and I love and appreciate them for it.

On a more somber note, was the news that Brent has been diagnosed with a very serious heart condition for which there is no solution and he has been told that his days are numbered. When he and Shelley left for home, they gave me a big hug and I couldn't help hoping that Brent would still be around when I get home in 18 months. It's a very sobering situation and it was touching to be together as neighbors and express our love. That relationship has been a sweet one. Bruce Ellis is especially close to Brent and has nurtured the relationship and won Brent over, I think.

By about three that afternoon we finished up and at 3:30 Mike and Marci arrived. They also had stake conference and Mike made a quick get-away without the usual Sunday leadership meetings and interviews. Mike had today off so it worked well for them to come and spend the night. It was so fun to get to see their family and specially to hold little Tanner who is changing and growing by leaps and bounds. After the evening's activities and the kids were down for the night, we visited about what's going on with their lives and even had time for Mike to vent a little about the heavy load that he is carrying as bishop. Sometimes the weight of it all about does him under and he looks forward to the day that that load will be lifted. As they left this afternoon, he thanked me for letting him vent and I assured him that I was a good one to vent to and glad that he could relax for a few hours. He said he guessed his time here could be classified as "Whining and Dining" (we'd just finished up pie and ice cream) and I thought that was a rather clever play on words.

Saturday Nate came for a visit and took me to lunch and then stayed for the afternoon. What fun to have time to sit and talk and catch up on family news. He is presently project manager for a job in Rexburg, remodeling a motel into 100 studio apartments for married student housing. He is working for and living with Chad and Trish and enjoying the chance to participate in the activities of their busy family. Chad's construction business is doing well and he is pleased to have Nate handle this particular job for him. Maurine is in Washington caring for her mother who has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and needs a lot of assistance. There is a chance that when Sister Allsop passes that Nate and Maureen may settle in Rexburg so that Nate can continue to help Chad with his business. That would certainly be great. Nate is such a dear brother to me!

Saturday night I had invited a group of widows and Melanie Hanni (whose husband was hunting) to attend the Saturday night session of conference with me. I just love that session but going as a single woman is uncomfortable so we banded together. I was in the combined choir for the Sunday morning session and appreciated the chance to sing with a big choir and to get to sit in the choir seats and look out over the audience! I love the members of our stake and marvel at their goodness and strength! The whole conference was inspiring and I came away with a renewed commitment to live the gospel. It was a little nostalgic for me to realize that this will be my last stake conference for a while. Thanks to SaraKay and Facebook the word is out about our missions and everywhere I go I have people talk to me about it and wish me well. It's actually been kind of fun and given me a chance to express my love.

On Friday Bonnie's mom, Jean, and her sister, Shannon, took me to lunch for my birthday, compliments of Steve and Bonnie. It was such a fun time together! They are such dear people and always a delight to be with. It's fun to have Shannon and her family in the community and to rub shoulders with them occasionally and keep track of their growing family. It's hard to believe that their oldest daughter is now in high school!

I appreciated all the remembrances on my birthday. Over the course of three days, I heard from all you kids and so appreciate the kind

consideration that each of you show me. Several in the extended Larsen and Richards families touched base with me, also, and I thought how sweet it is to be loved and cared for by a wonderful network of friends and family! Thank you.

November 23, 2011

I'm sitting here in Becky's dining room while the rest of the group get ready to watch the most recent Harry Potter movie. Becky and Jeff arrived from Shanghai about two this afternoon and the house has been abuzz with the prospects of an upcoming wedding in January. Although I met Jeff when I was in China last Christmas, it is nice to have a couple days here to get acquainted before SaraKay and I leave for Idaho on Friday. It has been fun to be here for one of SaraKay's concerts, to meet some of her students and her cooperating teacher, and to do some mission shopping. Life is moving quickly on and our departure dates draw near.

Becky promised to send out a letter soon but for now just put the following date on your calendar: January 14th in the Mesa Temple if the sealing cancellation comes through or same date if it doesn't, just a different venue. She will spend the next couple of months packing and liquidating and she and Jeff hope to get the move to Shanghai made during the school recess of the Chinese New Year. It's going to be a busy time for them but they are full of anticipation and excited for the months ahead. I will be unable to attend but know that several of the siblings are planning to fly in for the day and hopefully the Gentry's and Bricker's will lend support, too.

I have been grateful for the time with SaraKay. Already her December calendar is filling up (like I knew it would) and our days for preparation are numbered. I can feel the tug and pull of it all but know it will all work out. The farewell is at one on December 18th with a dinner afterwards. We know that it is a busy time of year so we certainly understand if other commitments or bad weather keep you away but we'd love to have you attend if you are able.

Hopefully you got the link to Josh's scholarship competition. Stephani was with him in Salt Lake when the winners were announced. It was one of those magical moments that come maybe once in a lifetime. That certainly is a feather in his cap! Congratulations, Josh!

November 27, 2011

I want to get this written and sent before I get into my week. I am feeling pretty overwhelmed by the preparations for the farewell and Christmas, and our departures. I know it will all come together but not without some anxiety over the many details. I appreciate everyone's concern for us and the offers of help. Many of the things left undone to this point have to do with yard clean-up and I'm hoping that those who are coming for the farewell will be able to arrive in time on Saturday to help with cleaning out the rain gutters and closing up the storage unit.

My time at Becky's was busy but enjoyable. The children are old enough that they are responsive to the situation and do their part to help out. They were all so excited for Becky's return and to get to have a few days with Jeff before he returns to China. I was also appreciative of that opportunity since I'll miss the wedding and all the family gathering during that time. He certainly is an impressive young man and I think both he and Becky feel like they've had a huge tender mercy in finding each other although living a world apart. I agree. Becky was pretty jet-lagged but sounded a little better when she called last night. The six weeks ahead will be hectic but she has prepared for an overseas move before so she has a pretty good feel for what needs to be done. Our prayers continue with her.

I attended the singles ward this morning with SaraKay since her best friend, Amy Gwynn, was giving her farewell speech. She departs on December 14th for Portugal. Following the meeting I walked to the front of the chapel to visit with her for a minute and when I turned around to return to where SaraKay and I were sitting, the crowd surrounding SaraKay was so huge that I just skirted around and went on my way. She has such a wonderful following among her peers here in this area and I know that she will enjoy this next month without the pressures of school or student teaching. Hopefully she can get in some hours at Kesler's and she is also applying to substitute teach in the district during December. The challenge is going to be to keep her home long enough to take care of business especially with the holidays approaching and all the festivities that always fill the days and weeks before. We are both performing with the community choir and orchestra in the Messiah so that will be a wonderful way to focus on Christ during the season.

Let me comment on our trip home from Arizona on Thursday evening and Friday. Originally, we were going to leave in the wee hours of the morning on Friday from Chandler and make the entire trip in one day but the closer we got to Thursday the more I worried about that plan and after conferring with Becky we decided to leave about five on Thursday afternoon and get some of our trip behind us that evening. We made motel reservations in Page, AZ and finished loading the car about 4:30. We had a teary good-bye realizing that it would be another 18 months before we'd be together again. Becky loaned us her GPS so that we could get out of the Phoenix area without getting ourselves lost. SaraKay has been using it these last four months to navigate all over the area and my time using it really made a believer out of me that traveling with a GPS is wonderful!

Anyway, with the '97 Buick LeSabre loaded to the roof with SaraKay's stuff, we left for home. Once we got on the freeway, I couldn't help but notice that there was a vibration every time we would accelerate to about 70 mph. It didn't feel like a wheel balancing problem but something else. This alarmed me and I asked SaraKay about it and she admitted that it has been doing that for the entire time that she has been in AZ! I also noticed that the front driver's side seat was so compressed that when I got behind the wheel, I felt like I was sitting on the floor. Then the subject of stopping for gas came up and SaraKay mentioned that the gas gauge didn't work so she just reset the trip odometer each time she gassed up (or almost every time!) and so we were dealing with that small inconvenience. By this time we had nearly left the Phoenix area and were heading for the AZ border with lots of cacti (plural for cactus) and long lonely stretches of road, as well as very hilly terrain. As you can guess, the minute we got into that terrain the problem with the jiggle became more severe and all the cars on the road went whizzing past while we chugged up the hills and then tried to gain enough momentum on the downhill side to give us an advantage on the uphill slope. I found myself bargaining with the Lord that we didn't get stranded, have a total transmission failure, or whatever else could happen to two clueless women between Phoenix, AZ and Blackfoot, Idaho. I have, of course, made trips like this before where you know you are traveling on a prayer but it has been quite a few years ago and I had forgotten how unnerving it is to know that any minute the bottom could fall out of your car and you would arrive home several days later than planned.

Well, our prayers worked and we pulled into Page about 10 that night and slept soundly. The next morning, we had prayer and asked for the Lord's continuing protection and support. Aside from the worry about the vibration we sailed along thoroughly enjoying the beautiful southern Utah scenery. I kept counting off the miles since I knew that my AAA Auto contract allows me to be towed for 200 miles free and when we reached Provo I felt a huge relief knowing that if things went to pot and we got stranded, we could at least get a free tow back to Rodney Love's Countryside Tire. I was so grateful when about five Friday afternoon we pulled into the garage (on our own volition) and had that trip behind us! We spent the next little while unloading the car and trunk and then in the midst of the boxes, suitcases, and other paraphernalia we knelt again and gave thanks for our safe arrival! What a relief! One more leg of this mission journey completed!

Yesterday we made a quick trip to Rexburg to finish up the immunizations for Yellow Fever, Meningococcal, flu, and Typhoid. Fortunately, she had already completed the Hepatitis A and B and Chicken Pox shots. We're going over SaraKay's mission packet with a fine-tooth comb and making sure that we have the converters, transformers, shoe shine and sewing kits, and all the other incidentals that are a part of preparing to leave the United States. It makes me so happy that I'm going to be serving my mission just 5 minutes from a Target and 15 minutes from a Wal-Mart.

December 12, 2011

I can't remember if I wrote a letter last week. Life has been so hectic that the days all run together. I feel like if I can survive this next week with all the farewell preparations, I can relax a little and enjoy Christmas. A few highlights from the past two weeks: On December 3rd SaraKay and I drove to Logan to Stephani's and spent part of the day phone shopping. My phone was so decrepit that every time I would use it part of the front face of it would come off and stick to my cheek. Finally, I removed the movable parts and lived with it that way until I could get a decision made. It wasn't as cut and dried as it might have appeared since I am with AT&T and SaraKay is on my plan and she needs to stay on my plan until the 27th. I had considered signing up to be on someone else's plan but most of you kids already had the max on your plans or your service was provided through your job. Tim was willing but it didn't really work unless there were more than two people on the plan. Anyway, after looking at all

the options, I went with a smart phone with AT&T and have been enjoying many of the features although it's doubtful that I will ever be able to completely figure out all the bells and whistles. Stephani and SaraKay went along as my advocates and before the day was over, I had a new phone to use!

Midway through our shopping we met Steve and Chrissy for a fun lunch at Olive Garden. Steve had just come from the temple and Chrissy was his date for the day. Chrissy was all dressed up and looked so grown up and Steve looked spiffy in his Sunday best. Most of the talk was about various phone plans since the decision hadn't been made by that time but we also had a chance to catch up on family news. Following lunch (compliments of Steve) we made the purchase and then went to Stephani's for a couple of hours before leaving for Provo. While we were at Stephani's we saw the nearly completed gazebo that Linds has been working on for a couple of years. It is perched at the back of their lawned area and nestled on the edge of the "wild place" overlooking the ravine. Linds was shingling the roof and had a system of pulleys, ladders, and planks secured to stand on as he worked with the shingles. Stephani commented that she couldn't watch, it looked so precarious, and we agreed. It was a bright but cold morning and we admired Linds' determination to stick with it until the job was done. He is quite the handyman!

Another reason for our trip was that Linds had shopped and purchased a laptop for me to take on my mission. He and David are my two family members that work for IBM and HP respectively and so they conferred on how to get me the best bang for my buck. When it came down to it, Linds found one on line that was even a better deal than HP would give me so he had it sent to their home and Stephani and I spent some time on it Saturday afternoon getting me oriented. I have wanted a laptop for a long time and I am thrilled to have my own and be able to take it with me on my mission. I was going to take SaraKay's but it is about four years old and has several problems that I didn't feel confident to deal with. I appreciated both Linds and David's helping me with this decision. One more thing to cross off my "to do" list.

Another reason for our trip to Utah was that Peggy Hansen had invited SaraKay and me to Zac's Christmas concert in the DeJong Concert Hall. Peggy and Zac have been so sweet to support SaraKay in her concerts and recitals that when she called and said she had tickets, we couldn't say no. After our shopping, Stephani drove us to Provo and then spent the evening with Katie. At one point we tried to get tickets for Katie, Steph, and Laurel, but the concert was sold out so we gave up on that idea. It was so wonderful and especially fun to be on campus again after so many years. SaraKay mentioned that aside from being in the Marriott Center for graduations, she hadn't ever stepped foot on the campus. I couldn't imagine that but I guess it's true. She's hoping to go there if she decides to get a masters.

Following the concert Peggy took lots of pictures and Stephani came and picked us up and we drove back to Logan, arriving a little after midnight. The next morning we left at six for home and got back for SaraKay's meetings. She is attending the singles ward again and reconnecting with many of her high school friends. Her best friend, Amy Gwynn, leaves for a mission to Portugal this Wednesday so they have been spending lots of time together. Uncle Gary has needed substitutes at school and is providing a pretty steady stream of work for her. Next week Gary and Linda are flying back east to spend the holidays with Ashley and her family and SaraKay is going to help out at the school while he is gone. I really appreciate Gary providing her with some work opportunities. Some of you may not be aware that Gary and Linda sold their home place and bought a lovely new home in Blackfoot. They are so happy to have the downsizing nearly over and to get settled in before the holidays.

Sunday morning the 4th I experienced a miracle. I am going to mention it in my talk for the farewells but thought I would relate it here since most of you won't be able to join us that day. Here is an excerpt from the talk:

"I have felt his rescuing influence these past months as SaraKay and I have prepared for our departure. Leaving house and home for 18 months has brought unique challenges. I have tried to anticipate each eventuality and to receive good counsel on what items needed to be addressed to enable me to be confident that the home place would be okay. I have felt the loving concern and willing hands of my neighbors and home teachers. Several weeks ago as I checked off my list of things to do around the house and yard, I began to wonder if my septic system would be alright if it remained idle for the duration of my mission. As usual in such dilemmas I sought advice from people acquainted with the intricacies

of systems and was given instructions on how to go about preparing to have it pumped out. If Steve was still alive this whole episode would have been a minor irritant, but to me, not too mechanically minded, the task was daunting. I knew that with the aid of my home teacher and the high priest quorum I could get the help I needed but I have tried to be as independent as possible and so I turned to my family and we devised a plan that when they arrived for this farewell we would locate the two systems, dig out the lids, and prepare things for the tanks to be pumped.

It sounded like a good plan but in the back of my mind I wrestled with all the what if's. What if the weather is terrible and the area is covered in snow, what if the lids aren't where I remember them being, what if the ground is so frozen that we can't get them dug out and on and on. I was also painfully aware that although I have a bunch of smart kids, none of them has ever dug out a sewer system before and my confidence level in this venture was about 3 on a scale of one to ten. But if I have learned one thing since Steve has been gone it is that I haven't done all I could until I have taken the problem to the Lord and so I started to pray that I would know how to proceed and be able to get past this last hurdle in my preparations.

Last Sunday morning I arrived at my meetings and was walking down the hall headed to the chapel when Brother Hanni, my next-door neighbor, walked out of the bishop's office and said to me, "Sue, what are you going to do with your septic system while you are gone?" His totally unexpected inquiry caught me so off guard that it took me a minute to respond. How did he know that I had been losing sleep over this? Had I mentioned it to Melanie, who has long been my friend and confidante? Had my home teacher gotten wind of my worries? Had one of my children made a phone call to the bishop? As it turns out, none of the above. I know that he was prompted to come to my aid.

Well, Brother Hanni promised to drop by and see what he could do. On Thursday, true to his word, he and Brother Tominaga dressed in insulated coveralls arrived with metal rods, shovels, crowbars, a blow torch to thaw out the ground and anything else two handymen would need to perform the rescue. Within an hour they had parted the Red Sea, I mean found the cement lids and wrought the miracle!"

I might mention also that I had another tender mercy last weekend when the YM offered to carry away my pile in the pasture that I had piled high with tree branches and leaves from last year's yard work. It was something else that I was going to have Mike help me with last weekend when they came to spend the day. When Reed was digging out the septic lids, he asked about the pile and I told him that Mike would be here and burn it for me on Friday. Both he and brother Tominaga advised against it saying that being so close to the house, they thought it would melt the plastic soffits under the roof. They volunteered to get a crew there the next morning with trailers to load and carry off most of it. I guess they were doing it for someone else in the ward and just added me to their list. Sure enough, Friday morning a crew arrived with trailers and pick-ups and Mike, SaraKay, and I joined them and we almost entirely removed that huge pile of debris. I so appreciate all the kindnesses this ward shows me! And I appreciated SaraKay and Mike spending time on Friday cleaning out rain gutters for me, a project that wouldn't have taken quite so long if the hose hadn't been left with water in it and was frozen solid. I'm still trying to get the hang of a lot of the tasks that Daddy performed so effortlessly and usually unnoticed by the rest of us. But I am learning and hopefully I'll get it right!

Last night was our stake choir festival and our ward performed a number with SaraKay soloing on it. After the concert many people came up to compliment SaraKay on her solo and to tell us good luck for our upcoming missions. It was sweet to be with the stake members and enjoy the wonderful ward choir numbers. For the opening song the congregation sang "O Come All Ye Faithful" and it was a thrill to hear the power of that number when all the singers in the stake were there in the chapel and overflow together. This morning when I walked, several of my walking buddies commented on how thrilling it was for them, too. I love the songs of Christmas. This Friday SaraKay and I will be performing "The Messiah" at the Blackfoot Performing Arts Center. Linnea invited both Blackfoot and Snake River to participate and it has been so fun! We have several rehearsals this week but it's just so fun to be a part of that wonderful choir singing such heavenly music!

I feel like I'm going to be holding my breath until this weekend is over. Little Tanner had the croup last weekend so badly that Mike took him into the emergency room at midnight and in Andrea's

weekly letter to Laurel she mentioned that they had been passing around the flu. Hopefully everyone will be in good health and this weekend will go off without a hitch. Good luck to everyone involved in finals and to all you parents who are running here and there to school programs and parties. Pray for good weather! Love to all.

December 22, 2011

SaraKay is having a caroling party tonight with many of her friends and we're hosting so I'm here in the office awaiting the return of the group. I've made scone dough and hot chocolate and we've pulled the house back together after our Sunday hosting.

Let me mention a few details of our weekend. We couldn't have asked for nicer weather. No one had to fight bad roads either coming or going. I appreciated all of the extended family who came. From my side Nate (who is working in Rexburg helping on a big project with Chad) came and from the Larsens we had Karen and Jim, Gary and Linda, and Rick and Terry. Bonnie's folks, Jean and Morris, also came as well as Kwani and Dallin Winder and Kwani's mother, Ima, and several other friends who had attended the meeting. It was a full house but we had plenty of food and it was early evening before all of the guests left. Steph and Linds, Steve and Bonnie and their families as well as Tim left about six and Dave and Mike and their families spent the night and left on Monday. It was so fun to be together and I was so grateful that everything went well.

Laurel arranged to come straight from Provo Thursday night after finishing up finals and caught a ride home with some students from Blackfoot. She arrived right on our heels as we got home from Messiah dress rehearsal. We couldn't have timed it any more perfectly. I was so proud of myself when Laurel emailed me earlier that day to inform me that when she was close to Blackfoot, she would text me and tell me if she was coming to the performing arts center or just coming on out to the house to await our arrival. I have been trying to learn to text and part way through rehearsal I noticed that she had sent me a text saying that they had been delayed and so she wouldn't be arriving as early as she had thought. I very cleverly texted her back that we would be home by the time she arrived so we'd see her at home. After rehearsal I proudly told SaraKay that I had texted Laurel. SaraKay was so proud of me, too, until she checked her own phone and found that the text had gone to her (SaraKay) instead of to Laurel! Wow, how did I do that? Anyway, things worked out and we had Laurel all to ourselves on Friday and most of Saturday.

SaraKay and Laurel were great help as we baked cookies, made potato casserole, cut up veggies for the broccoli soup, frosted cookies, baked rolls and bread sticks, and got the house ready for the company. By three on Saturday David and Andrea arrived and just a few minutes later Stephani and Katie and then Tim soon thereafter. It was so fun to be together and we kept preparing food and visiting.

Sunday morning Steve and Bonnie, Linds and Josh, and Mike and Marci all arrived at the appointed hour and the kids had a chance to practice. The ward music chairman asked us to provide a musical number and so we had Jared, Joseph, Anne Marie, Chantelle, Nathan, McKay, Amber and Ellie sing "Away in a Manger" with Josh playing the cello and Stephani at the piano. All the kids had the song memorized and it was beautiful. Little Nathan missed the performance since he fell fast asleep on Andrea's lap but aside from that one change of plans the number went off without a hitch.

It was sweet to feel the support of friends, neighbors, and ward members at the Sunday meeting. So many people have been so kind and good to us these last few weeks. I have been humbled by the outpouring of support. We have wonderful people in this area and they have certainly endeared themselves to us through their many acts of service in our behalf.

Let me mention in closing that President Jenks called and said that SaraKay's visa was delayed so she will not be flying out of Pocatello like we planned but will need to go to the Provo MTC first and await her visa. Tim has some time off that week so he has offered to take her to the MTC for me. When I ask SaraKay if she would feel alright about that, she said that she would be seeing me once I got to the MTC on the 2nd and she was fine with that. This will be interesting. I am checking out of the house on the 31st and will be with Steve and Bonnie until Sunday afternoon and then I will be with Steph and Linds. Monday morning they will drive me to the MTC, picking up Steve and Bonnie on the way. I will check in at 10:15 and be there until I fly out on Saturday the 7th. I'll keep touch. A big thanks to everyone who has helped us be ready for this big adventure!

December 28, 2011

It's Wednesday, the BIG day for SaraKay. If all went as planned, Tim dropped her off at the MTC in Provo today at 1:00. We received permission from President Jenks for her to travel with Tim since he had other business in Utah and it would save me the expense and time of the trip down and back. Her visa to Brazil didn't come through so she will be in Provo until it arrives. She wasn't that disappointed about it. She has several good friends who are presently in the MTC including her best friend who is also learning Portuguese, so SaraKay was excited to get to be in Provo even if it is for a short while (we hope). The funny thing is that now I will be there with her so that will be kind of fun although I'm not sure that we will necessarily cross paths. The missionary who called to give me information about my MTC stay told me to mention SaraKay when I checked in on Monday and she said that she would arrange for us to share a meal time or something. Knowing that I would see her in a few days made our good-byes this morning a little easier. She spent the last couple of days carefully packing and going over her supply list with a fine-tooth comb, gathering sewing and shoe shine kits, having her immunization card in her handbag, and following the Church's instructions as carefully as possible. It has been interesting for us to be going through this preparation process together, comparing the different needs of the different missions, and marveling at what an amazing thing the Church Missionary Department is! The department certainly has it down to a science with every detail.

I so appreciated Tim and Mike and Marci's help the last few days. We had a thoroughly enjoyable Christmas complete with all the excitement generated by little ones awaiting Santa's visit, good food, good company, and lots of time for wonderful visiting. After an enjoyable Christmas Sunday and the opportunity to perform in the ward choir, we got up Monday morning and everyone pitched in to dismantle the Christmas decorations. What would have taken me hours to accomplish was completed in short order so other items on our lists could be addressed.

At five Monday afternoon Sue Fife Johnson babysat for us while we met President Jenks at the stake offices and SaraKay and I got set apart. Mike and Tim stood in the circle which made it very special. SaraKay was told that her deceased loved ones were aware of her and would be close by to assist her in accomplishing her mission. I was told that I had been preparing my entire life for this mission and that I take into the field an understanding of the gospel and an ability to work with people that would enable me to be an effective tool for the Lord. I received encouragement as well as counsel. I thought it was interesting that President Jenks touched on the one subject that my brother, Nate, mentioned when he came for our farewells. This same advice was given to me many years ago by my father and so I guess it is what I needed to hear. Isn't it written, "Out of the mouths of two or three witnesses?"

Let me share the counsel. Years ago, I was stewing over something (as usual). My father, being in on this situation, counseled me to do my best but to leave it in the hands of the Lord and to recognize that I needed to have flexibility and faith; that being too set on a certain outcome may not leave room for the Lord to work His miracles. Last Sunday as Nate left from our home following dinner, he visited with Steve and Tim and asked them to counsel me to keep in mind that those with whom I work will have their agency and that despite my best efforts I will come up against situations that simply will not go the way I have planned or prayed for and that I need to be flexible and let things unfold according to the Lord's will. President Jenks gave me that same advice: Do all you can but realize that people have agency and that despite your best efforts there will be disappointments; that I would need to be patient and long-suffering. Good advice from three faithful priesthood holders.

Following the setting apart we returned home and quickly gathered together Mike and Marci's belongings and little ones and then we followed them to Pocatello to Applebee's for dinner, Mike's treat. It was such a busy time at the restaurant that I worried about their children getting restless but despite the wait the kids were patient and we had a thoroughly delightful and delicious time! Of course, saying our good-byes was emotional. All weekend we had been commenting on how much the kids would change by the time we returned in 18 months, especially Olivia and little Tanner. Or should I say, big Tanner. He is like a little sumo wrestler with a quick and ready smile!
Yesterday I took advantage of having Tim here and he gave me a course on all kinds of technology. He was so kind and patient and long suffering with me despite my confusion over all these new devices that I'm taking into the field with me. We commented that SaraKay is

divesting herself of her computer, cell phone, Facebook, and all the other social networking that has been such a part of her life and I am taking on the task of using an iPhone, laptop, Bluetooth ear phone, and learning to Skype face to face over my laptop. Needless to say, I am feeling quite overwhelmed by it all. Tim helped me go through a lot of Dad's boxes of cords, old computer bags, and outdated equipment that I haven't got a clue about. He counseled me on various other topics including my upcoming taxes and an exemption that he is going to submit for me. I think by the time he went to bed last night I had totally worn him out. I can't believe how hard it is for me to understand such things as ethernet, cable, modem, power cords, routers, webcams, wireless, Wi-Fi, and on and on. It's almost more than a body can bear!

I've spent the day going over lists and cancelling the garbage pickup, newspaper subscription, SaraKay's phone, filling out change of address forms, talking to the plumber, figuring out my bank balance, and returning library books. I've got a pile on the guest room bed that keeps growing and I'm eating everything I can to help clean out the fridge. I told my company that they couldn't leave until the cupboards and fridge were bare but no one paid much attention to me. My plan is to leave here about four on Saturday and spend the night with Steve and Bonnie before going to Stephani's on Sunday for the afternoon and night. She and Linds and Steve and Bonnie will deliver me to the MTC on Monday morning at 10:00. Every time I think of it, I get this huge lump in the pit of my stomach. Surely if the Nauvoo women could sweep their homes clean, put their brooms in the corner of their kitchens, close their front doors behind them never to return again, and turn their faces to Zion, I can lock up my home and put things aside for a season.

I'll keep in touch. I don't have the same restrictions as the young missionaries but I am going to try to give myself to this missionary endeavor as best I can. When I find out my schedule, I will let you know so that we can keep in touch. Love to all and a Happy New Year!






Columbia




SISTER LARSEN
JESUS CHRIST

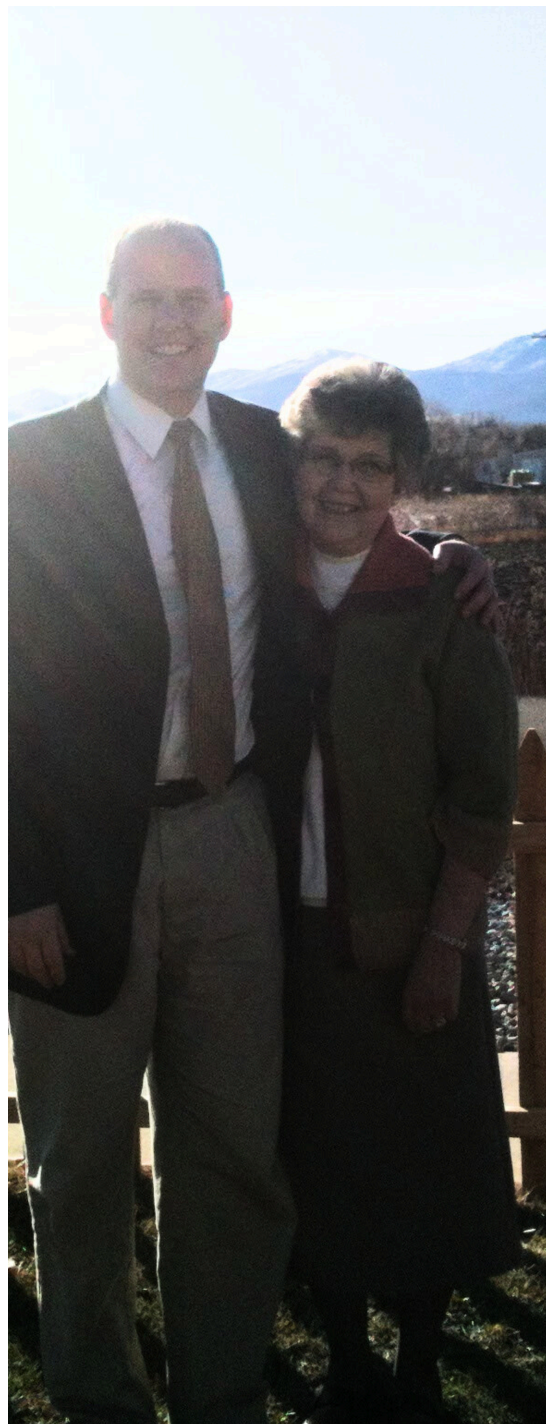

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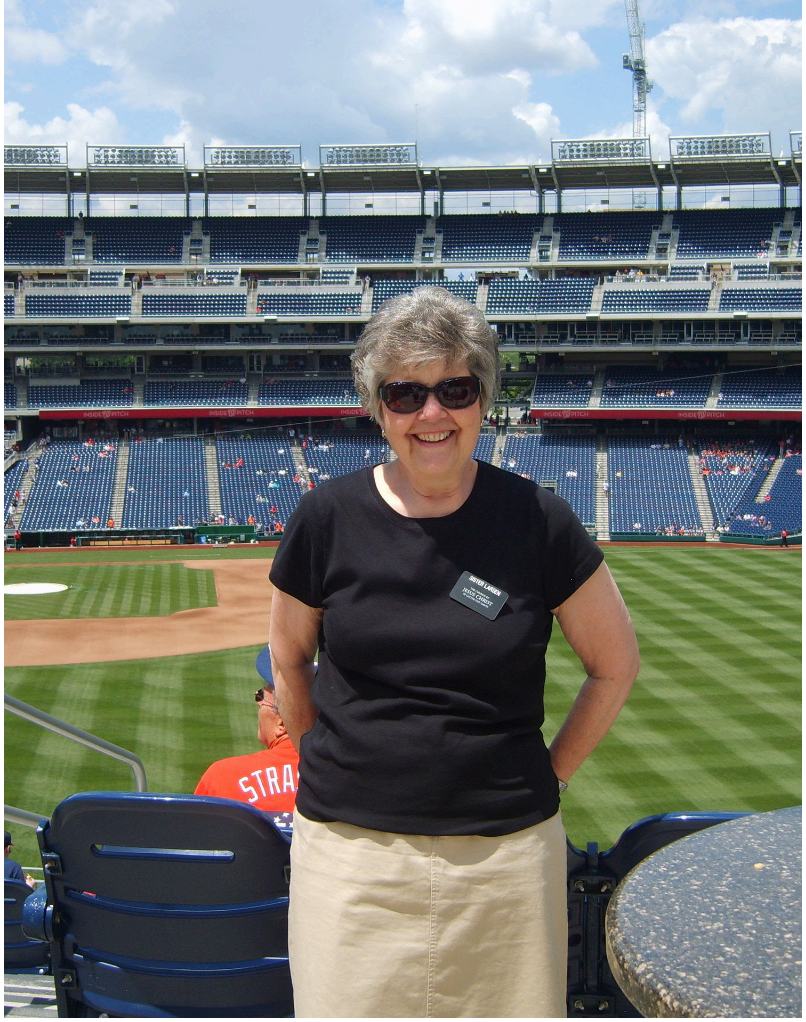





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THEY ARE NEVER ALONE
THAT ARE ACCOMPANIED
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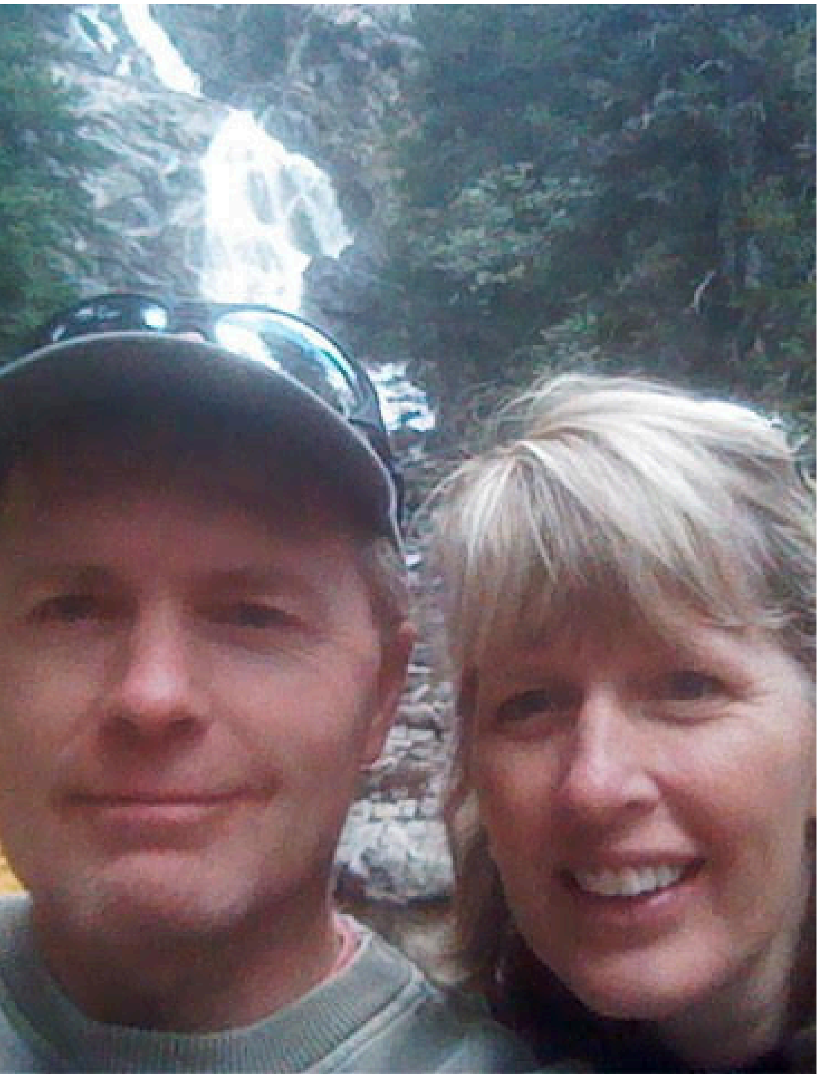




















Sky View
Ultimate




Miracle at Philadelphia
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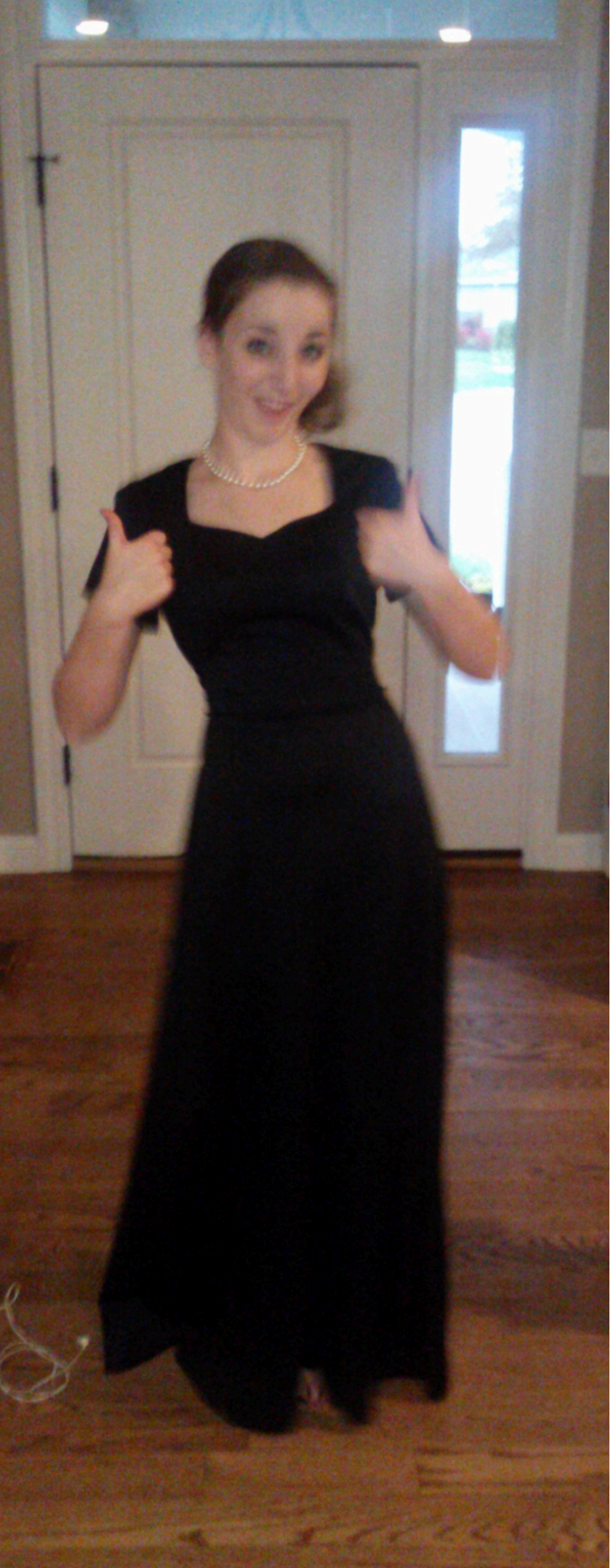



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MARKET MUSIC ✦ ART IN THE PARK
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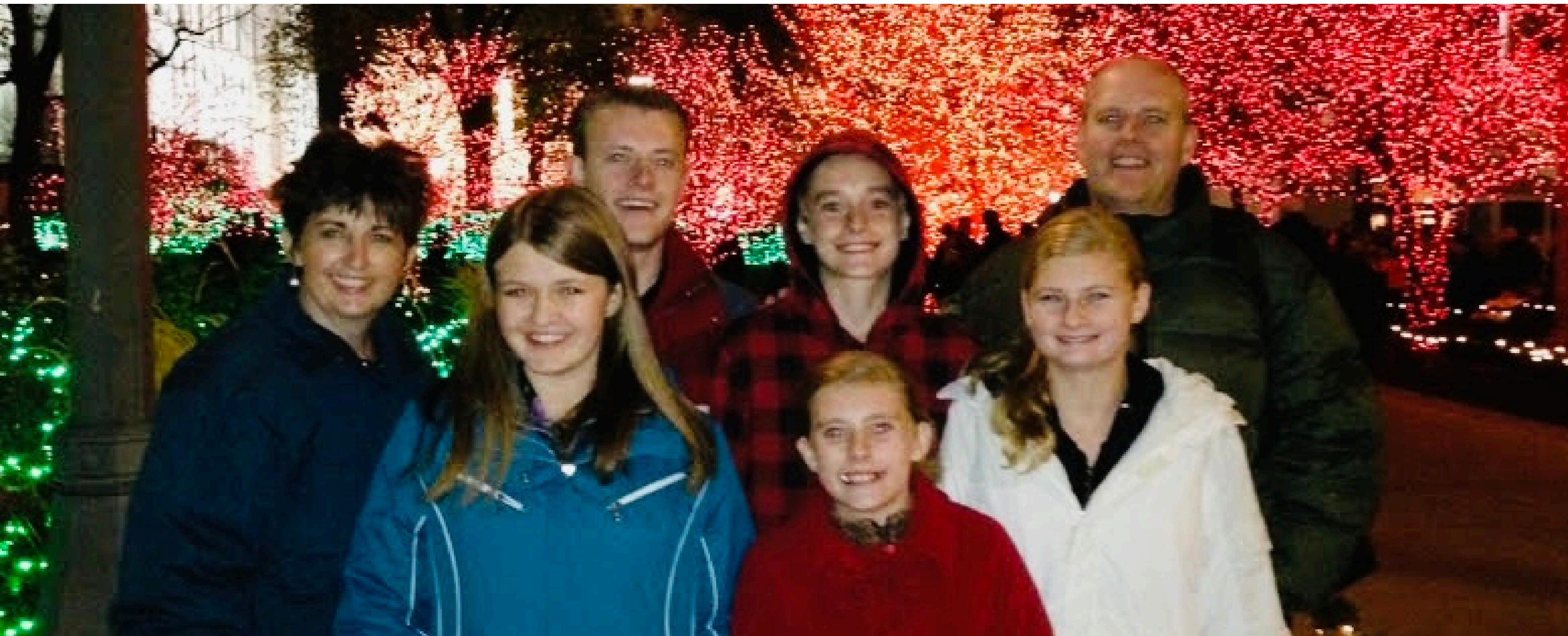





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CHARLOTTE MISSION
THE CHURCH OF
JESUS CHRIST
OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS










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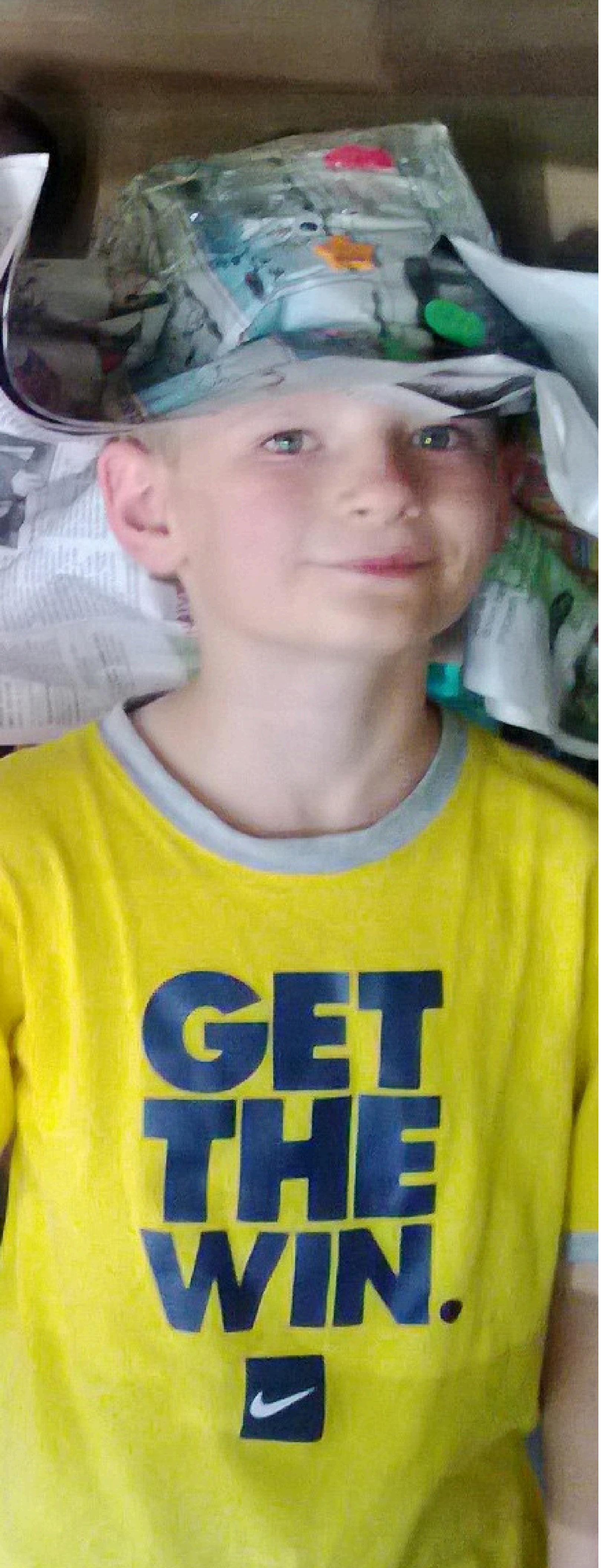





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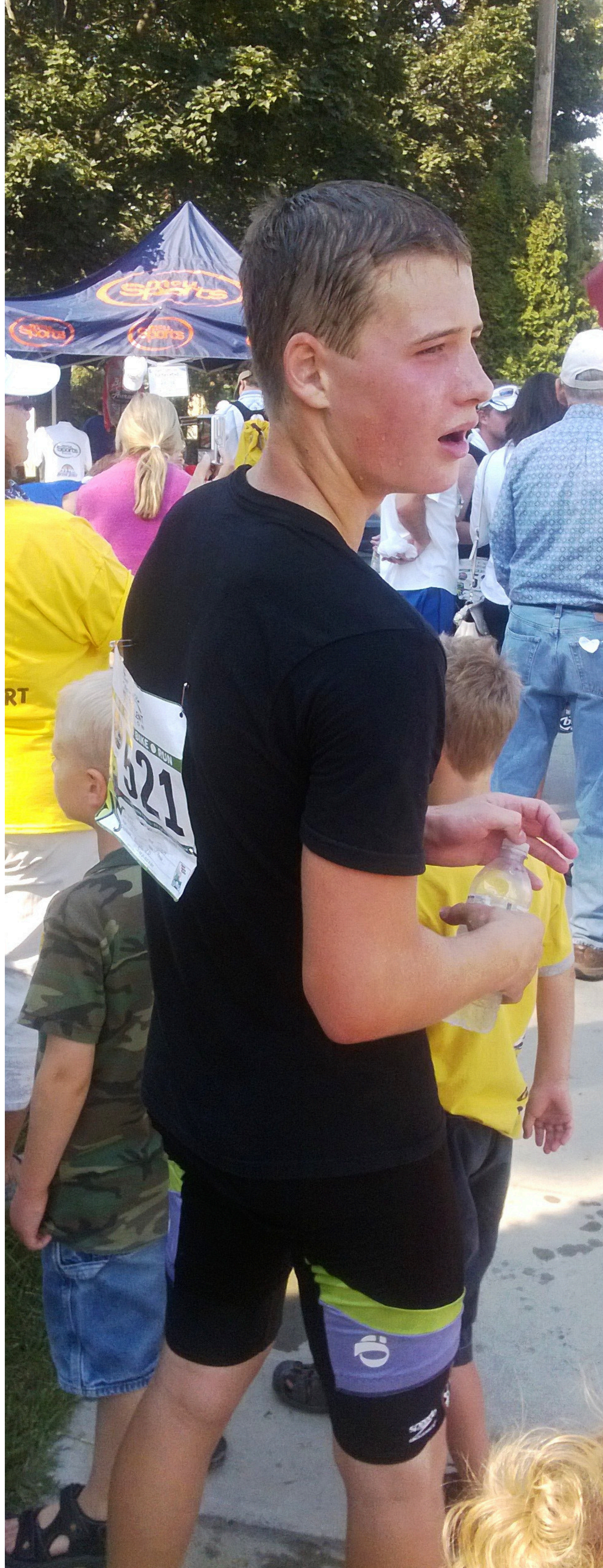












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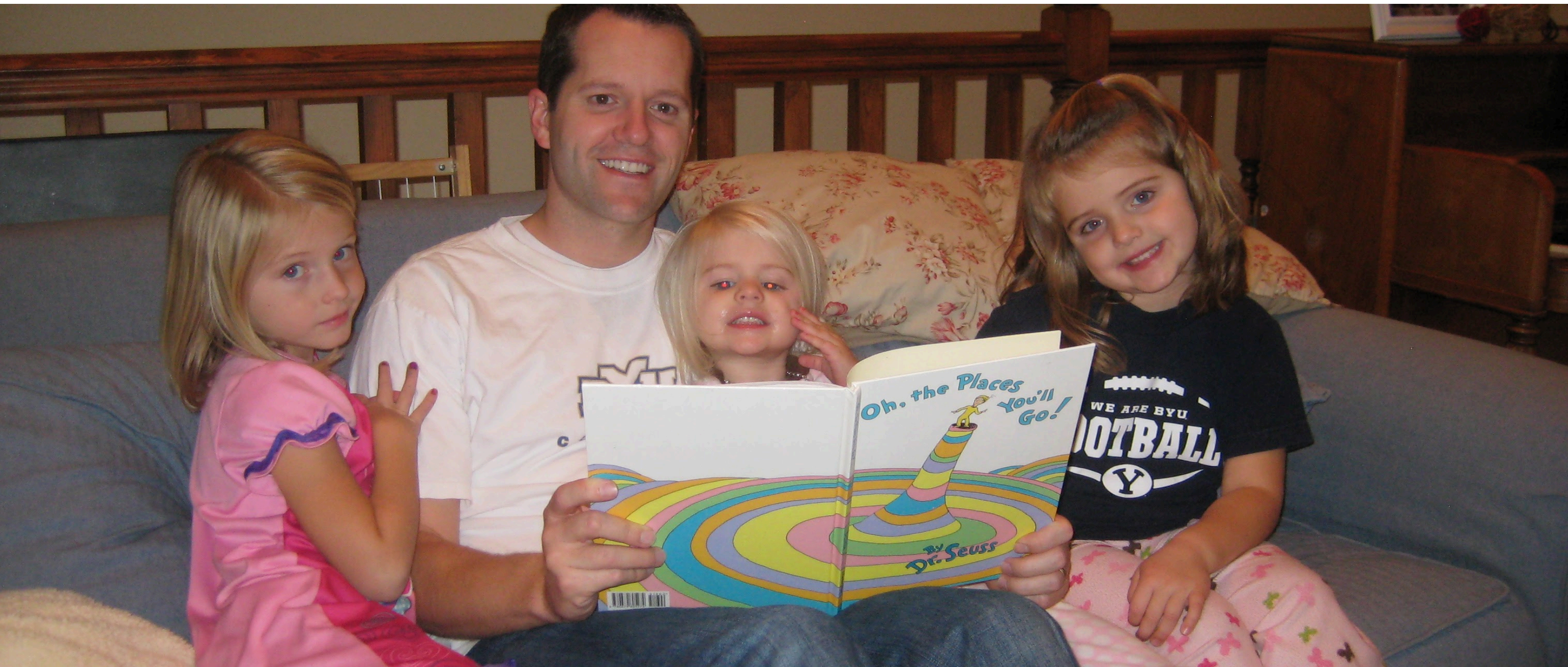


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Oh, the Places You'll Go!
By Dr. Seuss
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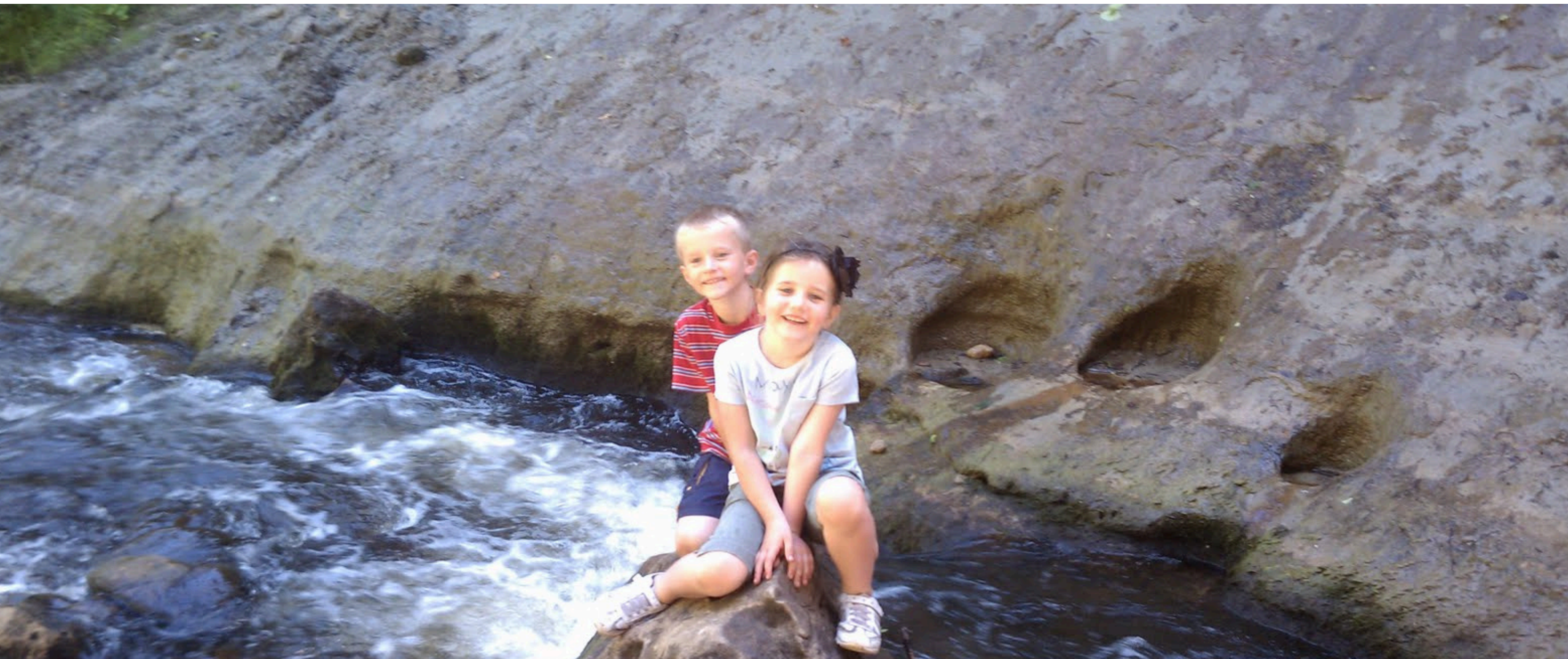





May 19, 2012




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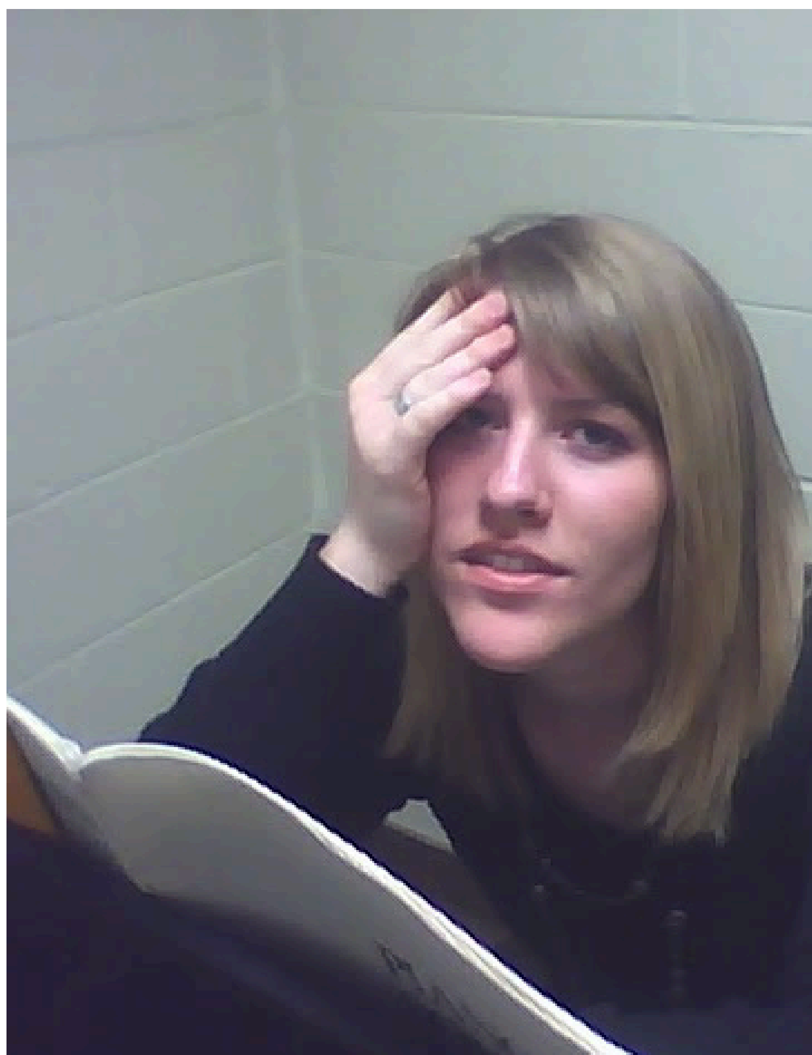


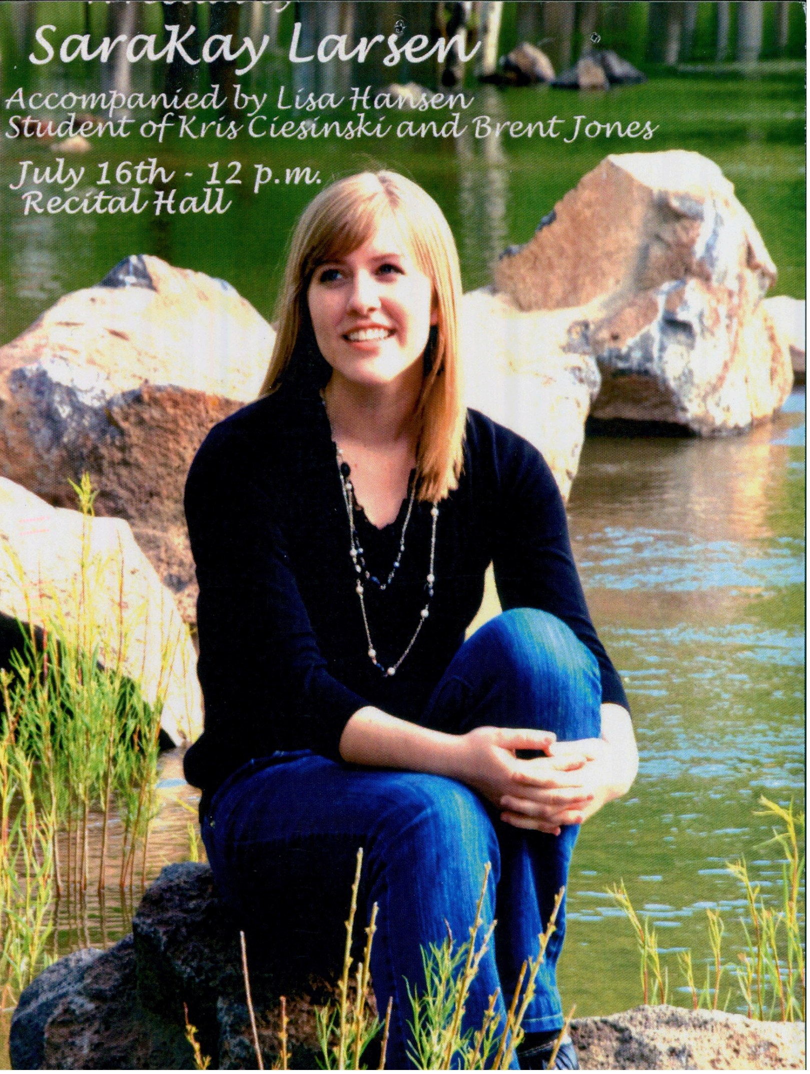








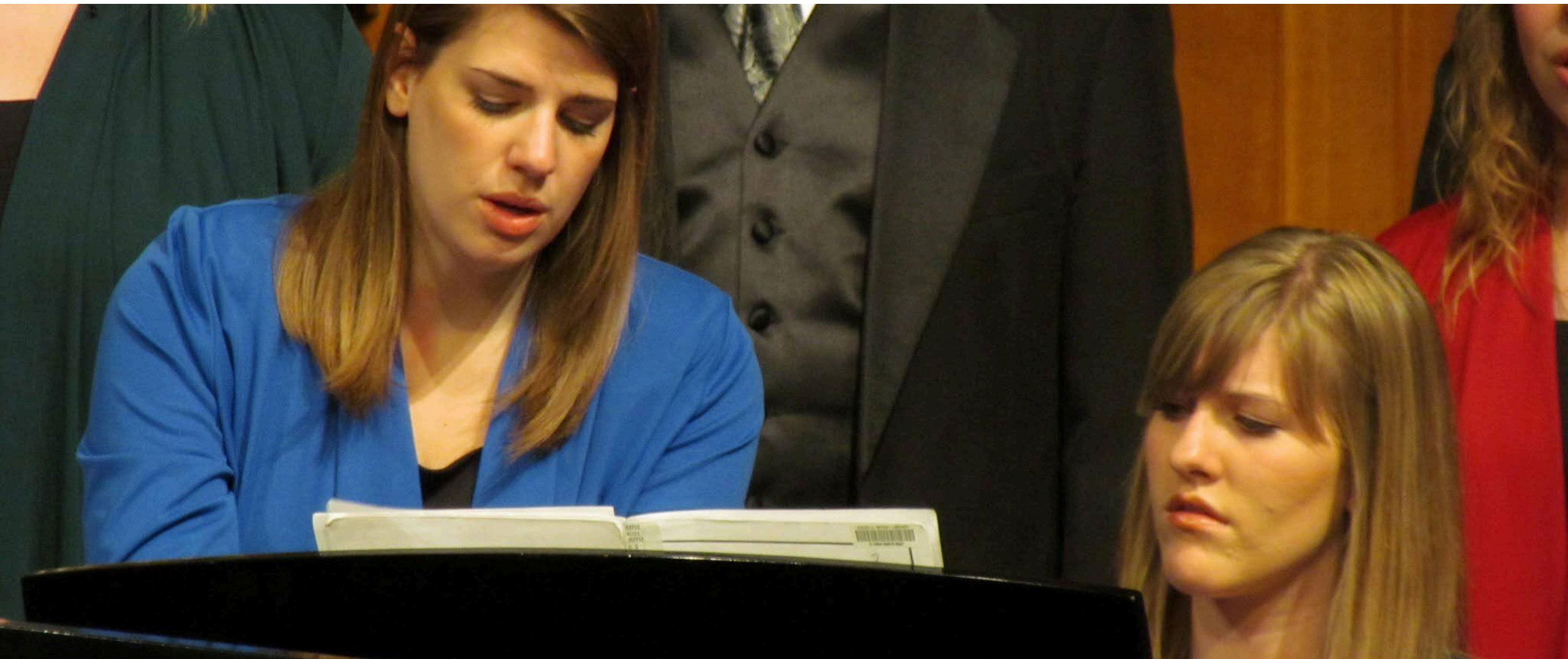

SaraKay Larsen
Accompanied by Lisa Hansen
Student of Kris Ciesinski and Brent Jones
July 16th - 12 p.m.
Recital Hall









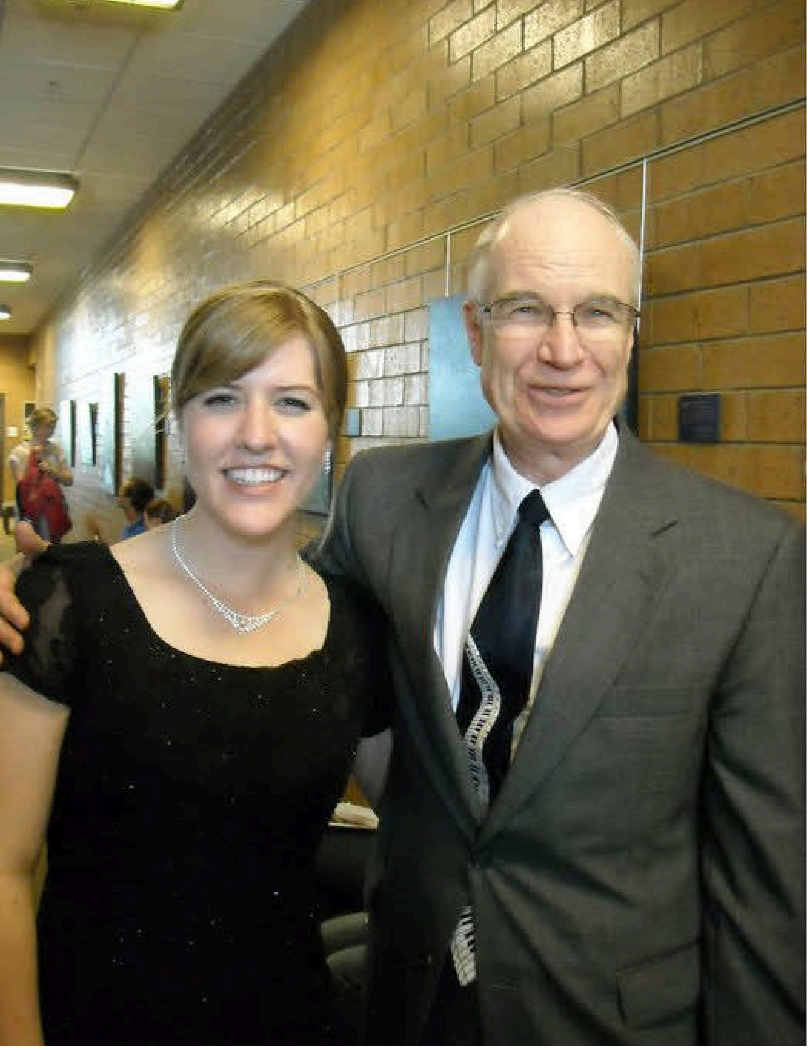























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GUIDE 147











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Dino Pack




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2012

January 4, 2012

Tim drove SaraKay to the MTC on Wednesday. He was enroute to St. George to visit a girl who he has been in touch with for several weeks and President Jenks gave permission for SaraKay to travel with Tim instead of me making that long trip. It was a godsend for me as I had a huge list of "to do's" and appreciated the additional day.

Last night when Tim called he said that he had been unprepared for how hard it was to leave SaraKay at the MTC. He said that she was in a contemplative mood all the way there and by the time they arrived he was feeling pretty emotional. He dropped her off and drove away but had to pull over to the side of the road for a while and shed some tears before continuing.

It put me in mind of something Mike said at the airport as we were seeing Paul off. He said he wanted to cry just thinking about what Paul had ahead of him. I guess it's good that we can't see the future.

Hopefully each of you got Steph's email about SaraKay's address. While she is in the MTC she can be reached through dearelder.com. Steph is going to orchestrate SaraKay's missionary letters home and forward them to all of us like she has Sam's. I appreciate her doing this.

I am hoping to see SaraKay today after I check in since I was told that I should inform the front desk when I check in that I have a daughter at the MTC and they would coordinate our lunch schedules. I'm excited to see her and hope that she is enjoying her experience.

Last week was somewhat of a blur with all the closing down of the house. Canceling services, returning Dish equipment, returning Cable One equipment, and emptying out the fridge and unplugging the appliances put me in mind of moving and it was about as overwhelming. I was so grateful that by Friday afternoon the work was done and I was packed and ready to go. It was such a relief to complete my preparations that I didn't feel too emotional until I got on the road to Steve and Bonnie's and then it hit me.

It was nice to be there with the Wellsville Larsens' and to play games and get several computer tutorials from Steve. They were so sweet to me. They were performing in sacrament meeting the next morning so I was pleased to be present for that. Bonnie was at the piano, Steve, Nate, Rachel, and Anne Marie sang, Jared played the violin and Chrissy the cello. Lots of compliments from ward members.

I arrived at Stephani's in time for dinner and had a wonderful visit with the Bennion's. I was tutored by Stephani on Facebook and other computer and phone questions.

After a good night's sleep and a quick breakfast, we left for Provo, stopping in Wellsville at a Burger King parking lot to leave the car with Steve. When we got there the whole family had come to send me off and even sang "Called to Serve" as we loaded in Stephani's car to leave. Although it was a holiday, all the grandkids got up early to see me off. Katie pulled out of bed and rode with us so Stephani wouldn't have to make the return trip alone and Josh and Linds arose early to wish me well. I really felt loved and supported!

We arrived at the MTC right on time and I was soon sitting in orientation classes, getting my name tag, and joining the other throngs of missionaries in the cafeteria. I have a sweet roommate, Shirley Cable, from the Dells in Oregon who is going to serve in the Houston South Mission with the mission headquarters in Sugarland, Texas, a suburb of Houston. She will digitize the books in the Dayton Library and then help transmit them back to the Orem facility to be posted on three web sites.

You might be interested to know that the group that I came in with was over 50 couples and 8 single sisters. The first day we did introductions and I was amazed at the missions represented by our grey-haired bunch. Let me name a few. California, Adriatic, Baltic, New York, Norway, Yemen, Jordan, Shanghai, Texas, Florida, Tennessee, Cambodia, Church headquarters in the translation department, New Jersey, the Polynesian Cultural Center, New Mexico, and others. My mission was included in the "member support group. The rest were family history, humanitarian, health services, public relations directors, office staff, and others whose assignments had not yet been received. Talk about faith to "go where you want me to go."

As we have been divided into districts and been instructed, inspired, and challenged, I have come to know these wonderful, faithful older couples and they are truly amazing! Some of them have had tremendous challenges to leave home and family including one couple whose married son

just had surgery for a brain tumor and another couple whose daughter is struggling with divorce. I have been humbled by the sacrifice I see in the lives of these senior missionaries and feel it a privilege to be one of them.

Being here with the young missionaries has been a sweet experience. They open doors and are so gracious and treat us with respect. I have seen SaraKay and spent time with her and even met her district members and other friends.

It has been fun to be here with SaraKay! Before I saw her on Tuesday, I had several of the couple missionaries tell me that she had been looking for me and they were trying to help us get together. When I finally saw her coming down the hall with some friends we just ran into each other's arms and jumped up and down! From then on, we've seen each other several times.

Today, as I went to my afternoon classes, a member of my district brought her to me. She had been in the halls inquiring for me and she was waving her visa in her hand! It had come and she will be flying out on Tuesday! She was so excited and we jumped up and down again!

Tonight, she saw me at dinner and I met all her district. She is the only girl in the group of 10 Elders but I can tell that they are really solicitous of her! She is overwhelmed with the language but is having a wonderful time. Last night for the Tuesday devotional we both sang in the MTC Choir! We are wringing out of this experience every ounce of joy we can!

I've loved the classes, the instruction, the music, the people, the setting; just everything about it is so wonderful. I will be leaving at 6:00 Saturday morning for Washington D.C. I'm grateful for this week of preparation. I'm learning so much about working with investigators and the process of helping prepare them for accepting the gospel. I'm looking forward to seeing Kathy and Deniece tomorrow afternoon. They are going to pick me up after my classes are over and take me to dinner.

January 10, 2012

These past few days have been quite an adventure! I said good-bye to SaraKay on Friday at lunch and completed my MTC training later that day. My companion and I decided to do our laundry before leaving the MTC so we spent a couple of hours doing that, had dinner, and then I spent the balance of the evening packing and repacking and weighing my suitcases to ensure that I wouldn't be charged extra fees at the airport. Baggage fees are especially pricey with Delta so I had previously mailed some of my really heavy stuff to my future apartment. I came in at about 48 pounds with my main two suitcases. My carry-on luggage and computer briefcase that Steve gave me to use were also packed to their limits so I wasn't sure how I was going to manage.

Fortunately, despite the fact that my companion didn't need to arise until later, she insisted on getting up with me and helping me get to the shuttle location. Here we were, two elderly women, dragging and carrying four suitcases, uphill and in the snow. Joking aside, we were going uphill and that morning we awoke to about three inches of beautiful, flaky snow! I so appreciated Sister Cable's help so that I didn't have to make several trips. I was supposed to be at the shuttle at 6:00 a.m. but one of the other missionaries was late so we left the MTC about 6:30.

When we arrived at the airport the other missionaries helped me get into the check-in line and an airport employee took my biggest bag and left it in a secure place so that I didn't have to manhandle all four pieces of luggage. I still looked and felt like a spectacle with all my bags but I thought if I could just make it onto the plane that I would be okay. We were delayed a while because of the need to de-ice the plane but soon we were airborne and the four-hour flight was pleasant.

When I arrived at the Baltimore airport my companion, Sister Wege, was waiting for me and we got a luggage cart and made our way to the parking lot. She is a vivacious, cute blonde who is a no-nonsense kind of a lady. She is pleasant, committed, clean, and everything else that a person could want in a companion. I feel so fortunate to have her at my side! Unless something unforeseen happens, we will be companions for the entire 18 months that I am here. She has had a very successful career and is computer savvy so that is helpful. She has a GPS and doesn't mind driving.

Our apartment is very nice. It's a little older but I have a big bedroom and very nice private bathroom and modern kitchen. It is on the 10th floor of a high-rise apartment building. It's definitely not what I'm used to but I'm adjusting.

Saturday night was spent getting moved in and at 7:30 a.m. on Sunday morning we attended ward council. A picture of the bishopric was posted on

the ward bulletin board and the second counselor was John Rodeback! When he arrived for ward council, I made his acquaintance and he told me that he was getting married in two weeks so he is not going to be in our ward any longer. It was fun to make that connection. There were several people who learned that I was from Idaho and who came up to introduce themselves.

The ward is so diverse: Blacks, Hispanics, a family from Ghana, Cambodians, Nepalese, and whites from all over the country! It was obvious that many are new members or investigators. The gospel essentials class had about 20 people in it, all of them investigators or newly-baptized members. It was so invigorating to be a part of it. Many of the whites are students attending one of the universities here or doing internships. Most are out of BYU and only here for a few months but they lend such strength to the ward family.

I went from person to person introducing myself and enjoying the chance to get acquainted. I also got to meet the other missionaries who are assigned to the ward. Since Sister Wege has spent the last two months at the Visitor's Center for the Christmas Festival of Lights, she hasn't developed a teaching pool but has accompanied the young sisters on some of their appointments so we are both starting fresh in this new ward. When we got home from our meetings on Sunday we spent the afternoon planning and going over the names on the ward list and making notes on our impressions and concerns. Tomorrow we will be meeting with the Relief Society president to get some input from her. We have a huge map of our ward area and are in the process of identifying sisters who have dropped into inactivity. We are going to start visiting homes tomorrow.

Monday we took a P-day and ran lots of errands. Today we had zone conferences all day and then we went to the mission office to get supplies and check on additional items for our apartment. At the zone conference I met many couple missionaries. Some of them I had previously met at a birthday party that was held Sunday evening for one of the senior Elders. We almost missed the party since we have a standing date for dinner every second Sunday and we didn't get back in time for most of it.

The couple who fed us dinner is active and has a tradition of feeding the ward missionaries once a month. It was a wonderful meal!

The zone conference today was so helpful; lots of great information on everything from teaching, rules for mission vehicles, referrals, a delicious meal, and talks from President and Sister Matsumori. They are certainly an outstanding couple and relate so well to the young missionaries.

During class I had my first interview with President Matsumori and tonight he and Sister Matsumori took us to dinner to get acquainted. Sister Wege said that we probably wouldn't see him again for several months as he travels the mission and is seldom at the mission office.

Last night Sister Wege and I joined a local "Anytime Fitness Health Club" and tomorrow will be our first orientation. It was a huge step for me to take but we don't have any workout room in this building and the weather is too cold to walk outside. I'm hoping this will work and we can get the exercise we need. I am thinking of Becky tonight with her upcoming wedding and also of SaraKay who is winging her way to Brazil today, January 10th.

Mom's note: Because I was absent and far removed from Becky and Jeff's wedding I have included the following summary of that momentous event, written at my request by Becky.

January 14, 2012 (Wedding day)

Jeff, Kia, and kids flew to CA from Shanghai the day before the wedding. Their flight was cancelled and they had to scramble to get a new flight routing them with an overnight stop in Korea. I got them a hotel reservation near the Incheon airport and a friend of theirs from Shanghai who had moved to Korea met them at the airport and helped them get to the hotel and made sure they had something to eat. The next morning they got back on a plane and flew to CA and were picked up at the airport in Los Angeles by the Smallcombs. They drove 8 hours to Chandler and arrived late afternoon. We hosted a get together and campfire in our backyard for everyone who had come into town for the wedding. The kids all met each other in person for the first time, the families visited, the girls tried on dresses and Seth tried on his suit. Dave went to get shoes for Alia that were a better size and Summer gave Seth a haircut. Mom Olsen hemmed Seth's suit pants. Hollie Arfmann painted all of the girls' nails and gave them homemade hair accessories that matched their dresses. Our colors were silver, purple, and ivory. Jeff's side of the family went to

a hotel and my siblings camped out on any bed/couch/floor they could find.

Place: Mesa Temple Luncheon: Buca di Beppo Attendees: Alan and Rajean Olsen, Sara and Jon Spendlove, Wendi Pehrson, Erica Olsen and Cooper Charlton, Raymond and Bernice Couch (Jeff's maternal grandparents), Jayson and Hollie Arfmann (my friends from Idaho), Melidee Hall, Pam Kubricky, Danielle and Jared Platt, Scott and Mignon Jeppson (friends from my AZ ward), Jeanie and Scott Gentry, Lisa and Don Bricker, Stephani Bennion, Shauntel Anderson, Stephen Larsen, David Larsen, Michael Larsen, Paul Larsen, Timothy Larsen (Tim's girlfriend Summer) (SaraKay and Mom were on their missions and John was in China) P.L. de Avilo, Kia Smallcomb, Tom and Amy Smallcomb, (Taylia's family.) Photographer: Jared Platt—he donated his services as a wedding gift. Trisha Danielson from my ward did my make up for me as a wedding gift. My friend Pam Kubricky made my bouquet and the other flowers. She hosted an open house in her home and had people from the ward donate refreshments. We just invited people via email and Facebook and word of mouth and had about 150 people attend.

My dress: Chet helped me find a wedding dress that was appropriate for a second marriage and gave it to me for a wedding gift. I bought fabric to use to make the dress more modest and my friend Verlene Dominguez sewed cap sleeves and a back insert. I bought fancy Jimmy Choo shoes that we called "Mom of 8 shoes."
I purchased ties and sent them to Laurel in China to get them altered for the boys.
The Olsen kids went back to CA with the Smallcombs for a few days while Jeff and I went on a honeymoon.

My friend Mignon Jeppson watched the Seely kids for those 2 ½ days. We gave her some dressers and bookcases in exchange. Erica and Cooper took some of our suitcases/boxes back to CA in their pickup. As soon as we got home from our honeymoon, we finished packing the rest of the 23 boxes and suitcases (including car seats and cello cases) with all of our belongings and then moved everything else to a storage unit. My friends hosted one final garage sale with the remaining items after we left. Jon Spendlove arranged for a rental van to transport us and our luggage to CA. We spent a day together at Disneyland in CA as our new blended family's "honeymoon" before flying to China.

John and Laurel and friends from the Shanghai Branch had stocked our house with groceries and a few wedding gifts. They had unpacked, organized, set up furniture, and cleaned the new apartment. It is apparent from this summary that we relied heavily on family and friends to make it happen.

January 16, 2012

I have just a few minutes before we leave for Baltimore to visit a woman from the ward who is terminally ill with cancer. She is just one of several visits that we are going to make this week. The Relief Society President gave us a list of 40 sisters who are baptized but who have disappeared from regular attendance and who need some shepherding.

Yesterday at church we took notes, met new people, attended the Gospel Essentials class and got acquainted there. We fellowshipped an investigator from Sierra Leone who is in the country because her life was threatened by the children of her husband's other wives. She was in England for three years with him (High Chancellor of Sierra Leone) and then things started getting bad and she was advised to leave both her country and England and come here to the United States. Her children were deported back to Sierra Leone but once her divorce is final, she will be able to bring her children here with her. She is living with a family who are Muslims but she has a brother who has been a member of the Church for ten years and she feels she wants to be baptized.

Last night we took her to a monthly fireside that is held each 3rd Sunday at the Washington D.C. Temple Visitor's Center. There were a couple hundred people there and one of the activities was to have the recent converts stand and introduce themselves. It was very touching to see the full-time missionaries bring their investigators and recent converts. They are from all walks of life and every economic level, although most are young 18-30 year olds, predominately Black.

It was a thrill to be a part of it and to see the success the missionaries are having. Last night the recent converts were from France, Liberia, and Peru. Two young people were on the program and gave their conversion stories. One was previously of the Jewish faith and the other was Catholic from Peru. I'm starting to fit in and am beginning to know the other missionaries.

We had a huge week last week mapping our area and designating women with push pins on the map, visiting recent converts, getting our area book updated, and other organizational tasks. It is easy to love these people. The members of the ward are very fine and dedicated and I think that they are accepting us.

Sister Wege and I get along great. We both like to organize and are efficient in our daily activities. This week we are going to make some cakes for some birthday visits and also bake some bread to deliver as we visit. I miss my pots and pans and kitchen but we'll make do. This weekend we are hosting a party on Saturday night for several of the couples in our district who are celebrating birthdays. Life is so busy but so good and it is a pleasure to wake up each morning and know that I have the time and energy to devote to the Lord's work.

I appreciated the pictures and texts that I received on Saturday regarding Becky's wedding. From all accounts it was a wonderful day with lots of teary moments and show of support from friends and family. I had a good day here, but couldn't help but think about how sweet it would be to peek into the sealing room and see 8 of my children (and possibly Daddy) seated around the altar.

Thanks to all who came so far and gave your weekend to show your love and support. I'm sure the next few months will be pretty wild but what a blessing for Becky and Jeff to have found each other.

I haven't heard from SaraKay yet except for a short e-mail letting me know that she had arrived and a picture with the other missionaries who had just arrived at the Sao Paulo MTC.

I had a dream this week that was interesting. I was somewhere surrounded by people and they started walking towards me and asking me for help. I would help them and then another person would approach me and ask my advice and this continued and in the dream I kept wondering why they were asking me for help and why I had all of a sudden seemed to be the "go-to guy" for these people I hardly knew.

When I awoke I had the dream on my mind and thought about it most of the day. I came to the conclusion that I had been studying about my calling as a personal representative of Christ and that I did have something that I needed to share with all the people.

The dream made me realize how intense these last three weeks have been and that even my subconscious was dealing with my new "errand" from the Lord. It made me understand Sam's comment that any life outside of this missionary life seems far removed. I'm so grateful for this opportunity and for these wonderful people that I am meeting. The senior missionaries are also amazing and just an added bonus to all the blessings of this mission experience!

January 22, 2012

This past week has been a whirlwind of visiting, teaching, phoning, and getting acquainted. Last Sunday we went to our block of meetings with the goal of meeting some of the less-actives that are on the ward roster and of setting up times to get better acquainted.

Monday morning after a session at the gym we left for Baltimore to see a ward member who is suffering with cancer. Upon arrival we were turned away because she was having a bad day and didn't want visitors. We had communicated to her mother our intentions and she thanked us for the effort even though we were unsuccessful.

On Tuesday we started the day off with District meeting which was wonderful training for us. It is so fun to be a part of the full-time missionary effort and to form relationships with these fine young people.

Wednesday we had a district meeting for all Women Auxiliary Specialists at the Visitor's Center and then made a quick trip to attend a session at the D.C. Temple. What a thrill to see the interior of the temple. It is truly exquisite! The session is much more informal than in the Idaho Falls Temple since there are many small endowment rooms and you only move from one room to the next when you are through with the endowment and moving into the Celestial room. There were several other missionary couples also attending, and one couple--the Bushman's from Rupert--asked if I knew Gary and Linda Larsen. Sister Bushman is related to the Eskelsens of Blackfoot and that is how they are connected. I told them that I would be sure to mention them to Gary and Linda is this weekly letter.

After the session we were off again in our little white Acura, with Sister Wege at the wheel and me with our area book calling sisters and arranging visits. The balance of our week was spent making visits, transporting investigators to appointments, sitting in on the Elders' lessons

with their investigators, cleaning the Church, hosting a party for two senior sisters who were having birthdays, delivering lemon bread to several of our contacts and planning, planning, and more planning. We are excited about our system of reporting and keeping track of visits and phone calls.

I have come to appreciate the good saints who live in this area. Those of western lineage are the backbone of this ward but those new members who we work with are from every place and race. In just one day last week we taught a woman from Nigeria, one from Sierra Leone and another from the D.C. area. A strong family from Ghana just recently arrived and one of our investigators is a woman who was married to the High Chancellor of Sierra Leone who was an ambassador to England the last few years. She and her husband started having marital problems and she has sought asylum here in the states and is finalizing her divorce so that her two children can join her to make a new life here in the states. The stories of these people and their conversions are truly amazing! I have seen such faith amidst tremendous odds and continue to marvel at how difficult life is for many of these people who have left home and family for the gospel's sake.

The Africans, American Africans included, have their own unique culture and it is quite a strange thing for me to be in their homes where they are mixing the old ways with the new, sometimes to the detriment of their testimony. I can appreciate Paul the Apostle's woes as he sought to keep the doctrine of Christ pure and undefiled from pagan influences among his new converts. That is the same battle the Church fights out here with so many religions and cultures coming together. The Blacks love the church but sometimes they are very shallow in their understanding and it creates challenges.

Hats off to all the saints who labor so diligently and who love these new members and strive to make them "no more strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God." Sister Wege and I love this chance to do the work of the Lord 24/7 and we continue to enjoy one another and those with whom we work.

January 29, 2012

Saturday: Our appointment fell through for tonight so we came home, got in our pajamas, and I'm getting a jump on this letter. We've had a full and productive week going with the full-time missionary sisters, transporting investigators for the full-time Elders, teaching lessons, visiting one sister in the hospital and rest home, and phoning, texting, and dropping in to visit anyone who would let us in.

We've had some wonderful experiences getting better acquainted with the sisters in our ward as well as chaperoning when the Sister missionaries taught a young single man and his two daughters. We've been at the temple to a sister missionary endowment session and attended lessons in the Visitor's Center. We've delivered roach traps, boric acid, a magnifying glass, a large print Book of Mormon, a King James Edition of the Bible, Ensigns, oranges, apples, and bananas. Whatever it takes to start forming these bonds of trust, we're doing it.

We've ordered food from the Bishop's storehouse for one family, scheduled a blessing for another sister, and set up appointments to teach several sisters the new member discussions. We've planned, prayed, and kept the highways hot as we've driven from one end of this ward to the other, sometimes several times a day. We've inspected missionary apartments and helped carry out their clutter and trash. We've had a wonderful week and give thanks for this sweet opportunity to strengthen the College Park Ward.

On Wednesday we caught the free National Archives shuttle to D.C. and spent the day touring. We walked from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial to the World War II Memorial to the Viet Nam, Korean War, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Martin Luther King and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial and took time to go through the affiliated museums. We about walked our legs off, but had a wonderful time. By one that afternoon we visited the Holocaust Museum and spent the next three hours there before catching the shuttle for home. We were exhausted but it was such a thrill to finally get to see these places that I've always wanted to see. Sister Wege has done a lot of traveling with her career and she just jumps in and knows where to go.

We are planning to go to D.C. at least twice a month and do as much sight-seeing as we can while we are here. I don't enjoy the traffic but Sister Wege's GPS has become our best friend and will get us about anywhere we want to go.

We get up early and go to a nearby gym to work out three mornings a week. That's been good for us as is all the walking we do as we do our

visiting. We live and eat pretty simply and try to use our time to best advantage. Life is good!

The first of the Larsen birthdays happened this month. Little Islay, Nathan Cottam, and Anne Marie all celebrate birthdays this week. I will not be sending out birthday greetings this year but hope that everyone understands and will be okay with that. Sometimes when the day's work is done, I allow myself to be a little homesick for my beautiful family but I'm trying not to focus on that. You're in my prayers every day.

February 5, 2012

It doesn't seem possible that we are at the beginning of another week! We keep busy visiting the sisters and getting to know the people of this ward. Let me share a little about the demographics: There are over 350 separate households, most of them apartments and many of them in pretty rundown areas of six different towns. Getting from one member's home to another on the far side of the ward can take as much as 45 minutes depending on the traffic which can be horrendous at rush hour. Many of the people are singles, many recent immigrants who are battling language and poverty and trying to get a new start in a new country. This ward is full of promising young couples between the ages of 20-30 who are having their families and attending graduate programs here at University of Maryland. For the most part they are very bright and strong in their testimonies and are willing to share their time and talents with the members of the ward. Most of them live in rental units and are used heavily in key leadership positions while they are here.

There are some permanent residents also but most of them are in the 55-70 age range and have lived here most of their lives. Real estate prices here are so high that very few actually own homes; or their homes have lost value because of the neighborhoods getting run down. There are very few young people in YW and YM but they have a good program for them as well as having early morning seminary.

Then there is this huge group who are new converts of the last 5-10 years who are from a variety of countries and who need so much nurturing and teaching. Many have just dropped out of sight since their baptisms and need attention. Let me list a few of the names and give you a feel for what the ward leadership deals with as this flood of converts keeps coming in and straining the resources of the ward. Here are some samples of names. Zaimab Alfred, Mussie Legesse, Judith Ayuk, Nar Maya Biswa, Socoy Castilla, Debeneditto, Dodoo, Inyand Effiong Edpo, Ess, Foday Gebassay, and on and on. Imagine just learning to spell and say these names and then add to that all of the different cultures and you get a feel for what the leadership is up against.

So here we come and start visiting these ladies and their families and we see all the needs and then we discover that most of these people don't have home teachers or visiting teachers. We are surprised by that but learn that there are over 100 families in the ward that have neither because there just isn't the manpower. Many are never visited even though the ward has a dedicated and wonderful bishopric and the auxiliaries are strong; there are too few workers for the task at hand. We are so grateful to be here and add our efforts to theirs. Sunday the high priest leader suggested that we try harder to coordinate our efforts because the ward can take credit for home teaching and visiting teaching even if it is done by us. He said, "We need to know who these sister missionaries are visiting because they're going like hell-fire and the rest of us need to know what they're doing!" I had to respond when everyone laughed at his comment. "Brother Heath, can we take that as a compliment?" That got a laugh, too. Anyway, we have 75 sisters on our list of people to see in February. We're excited to see some of these sisters start responding to our efforts. Many of the people we are visiting are congenial and gracious towards us but their lives are full of difficult things like non-member spouses, lack of transportation, conflict because of their membership, and jobs that take them away on Sunday. Many of them don't have clothes that are appropriate for meetings but there are enough of them wearing pants, etc. that it usually isn't too big of an issue.

We have some who we are teaching who don't remember the gospel they were taught prior to their baptism. We are teaching one very large woman in a rest home who was baptized years ago but who can't remember much of anything she was taught. While visiting her each week we also visit her roommate and one of her male nurses. So far we have taught her several lessons and left books and pamphlets for her roommate and caregivers. It is a delight to teach her. She is so pleasantly surprised by the plan of salvation and the wonderful truths regarding why we are here, where we came from, and where we are

going. She reads the pamphlets and then asks us questions when we come for the next lesson.

We see a lot of disheartening things, too. One of our converts has recently had a stroke and she and her mother live on the edge of homelessness. The ward helps with food but the bishop has to be very careful to not let people use the system instead of taking responsibility for their own lives. We teach the new member lessons to Tigi while sitting on two chairs (the only furniture in the living room) and the first visit we watched as the roaches ran up and down the walls and nearby carpet. We took roach bombs the next time we visited and tried not to act squeamish about the bugs. We think Tigi's mother is on drugs and it's just a sad situation. We continue to befriend and teach and pray that things will improve for Tigi.

I had an interesting thing happen just before we made one of our visits last Wednesday evening with a young woman from El Salvador. We were sitting in the car waiting for her and watching the front door of the apartment building. We had confirmed our appointment and knew that she would be home soon. As we sat there waiting in the dark car, I had the impression that she was having marital problems. This was rather strange since I had only met her once and not even visited with her except to make the appointment.

When she arrived, her husband went into the back of the apartment while we visited with her. She was very sweet and we learned that she has a long history of membership in the church. She had even attended BYU-I at one time and was presently enrolled in a local college. Just as we were about ready to complete our visit, I asked her if there was anything that we could do for her. She looked at me with a puzzled look and then said that she needed us to advise her. She had recently discovered that her husband was becoming involved with his old girlfriend and she had confronted him about it and there had been bitter words and fighting. She was devastated and needed help to sort out things.

After we left, I thought about my impression and was grateful that I had been prompted to give her a chance to open up to us. We have let the bishop know and he is going to meet with her and hopefully help the two of them find a way to patch things up. The Lord is in this work! He loves his children and it is a pleasure to be a tool in his hand in finding those who need the gospel and are ready for it.

February 12, 2012

It's a blustery, cold day out today, probably the coldest since my arrival. We have felt so fortunate that we haven't had the usual slick roads and winter storms to contend with this time of the year. Everyone who is a native of the area says that this is one of the mildest winters on record so we really count our blessings. Sister Wege is a safe driver but she's from Louisiana so she has been dreading the winter months. We both are happy to see the sun each morning and know that the roads are clear.

We have had a busy week. We are still going through the ward roster and trying to visit each sister and get acquainted. Sometimes we feel like detectives, trying to locate some of the sisters who were baptized and then dropped out of activity or out of sight entirely. We use their last address and start there.

Most of them don't have phone numbers so we go to their last address and leave our phone number in their door. If anyone lives at that address, they will usually call us back because we don't put our reason for needing to contact them. Many of these sisters have tried to get lost and usually are disaffected with the Church and don't want us coming to visit. We try to be gentle in our approach but it's hard to combat it when someone says, "I want nothing to do with the Church any longer and please tell the Bishop to take my name off the rolls of the Church!" Yes, we've heard that this last week as well as sisters telling us, "All you worship in your Church is Joseph Smith and I want to go to a Church that worships Jesus Christ!"

I keep wondering why all the animosity towards the Church especially since most of these sisters have joined within the last few years and willingly entered the waters of baptism. I'm sure that many of them are the only members of their family in the Church and that they had to defend it from day one.

Just to give you a feel for the situation: today in our Gospel Essentials class the teacher asked us each to stand and tell where our ancestors came from and who in our family has served a mission and assisted in the gathering of Israel.

Of about 12 of us in the class there were two of us who had family who had served missions. The rest of them were the only members of their families. It would be difficult to constantly have your own family fighting you and your beliefs. From some of the stories we hear, it is a constant

battle for these converts to defend their faith and whereas we are supported in our living of the gospel, they are trying to walk a tightrope between being active and pleasing a spouse or extended family. I have to take my hat off to them for their continuing courage.

It has been very satisfying to visit the sisters and start to build a bond with them, especially those who are open with us and willing to ask for help. Today the nonmember husband of one of the sisters pulled me aside and requested that we visit his wife as much as possible. He said that she needs it. We had already come to that conclusion. We think that she is on drugs and we are going to try to get her to attend an addiction recovery program that is being offered in our stake. It is such a blessing to have been raised in the Church and not have these issues to combat.

We attended the funeral for one of our contacts this week who died of cancer. We have been in communication with her family and they have been appreciative of our efforts to show support. They asked the bishop to conduct the funeral and he preached the gospel. He had asked a young family in the ward to sing, "I Am a Child of God" and it was such a sweet, spiritual part of the program. As I visited with the family, none of whom are in the Church today, I was reminded that the decisions we make in this life have eternal implications for our posterity.

February 20, 2012

We've spent the day driving from one house to the next, knocking on doors, looking through a few windows, talking to apartment managers, visiting with neighbors, giving out cookies and homemade bookmarks with our names on the back, and doing our best to locate the "Missing In Action" or "inaction". We thought that visiting on a holiday would enable us to find these working sisters at home, but out of the ten on our list, we only made contact with three. We did determine however that most of them still live where the roster says they live.

Each day we schedule a couple of visits with active sisters just so we don't get an inferiority complex from all the rejection. I'm trying not to take it personally but recognize that most of them have fallen away because they have broken their baptism covenants and are into smoking and drinking again. Some have decided that they can combine Mormonism with their other religion and reject the notion of one true Church. Others give in to non-member spouses or extended family who continue to criticize the Church and make every family get- together unpleasant.

We visited a young woman this week who is a member but who broke away from our discussion to have her smoke and cup of coffee and then asked us to wait for the closing prayer until she had put on her prayer shawl to cover her head. Sometimes things are so strange that Sister Wege and I can hardly hold it in until we get in the car and then we look at each other and laugh or cry.

We had a couples' party yesterday for the senior missionaries and before the party was over each couple told of some of their experiences. Several of them serve in a rougher area than we do and the stories they told made our experiences seem tame. I'll say two things about senior missionaries: they are some of the most devoted members I have ever met and they like to have a good time!

Sometimes I can't believe how much work there is to do and how few workers. The active ward members really carry a load! One of my favorite things that they do at the Visitor Center is have a monthly "Why I Believe" night. It's held in the auditorium and the full-time missionaries bring their recent converts and investigators. The program consists of two or three talks by recent converts and then guest speakers. Last night a black couple spoke and they really did a great job! The 500-person auditorium was about 2/3 full. As a part of the program, they passed around a microphone and all the converts of the previous month stood and gave their name and date of baptism. It is such a fun night and lots of enthusiasm as the full-time Elders and Sisters greet each other and introduce their investigators.

March 24, 2012

We just arrived home from Annapolis and a day of touring. We have been told that this next month we need to get in as much as we can since May is the beginning of the tourist season as well as school field trips. Already I've seen a marked increase from just a month ago at the sites we have visited and can see how much nicer it is when we aren't fighting the crowds.

Let me tell you a little about Annapolis. It is the capital of Maryland and the town centers around the Naval Academy. It is a beautiful campus on the banks of Chesapeake Bay and its buildings are mainly in the colonial style that is so prevalent here in the East. The town itself follows this

architecture and even their capital building is red brick, white trim, with a black pitched roof, and copula and steeple.

The town reminds me of Jackson Hole as far as the boutiques, candy shops, and other vendors. But of course, no antlers! We wandered around the town, visited the campus, toured the Naval Museum, had lunch, and also toured an old mansion whose original owner is a distant relative of one of the senior missionaries who is serving in the National Archives here in D.C.: Sister Dickey. She and her husband, Rob, were the ones who invited us to go with them and it was such a fun day!

The naval museum was absolutely amazing! It traced the history of shipbuilding from its early beginnings and then had small models of a lot of the ships that were built in England in the 1600's down through the years and also pictures of battles at sea and the history of our nation's early navy.

The biggest drawback to these museums is that a person could spend hours and hours in them except you are standing all the time and after a couple hours it just gets hard to do. Many of the displays involve a lot of reading.

The Charles Carrollton home that we toured is maintained by a group who raise money to maintain the property but the home was totally empty. It makes you appreciate all of the restoration projects that the Church has taken on including Kirtland, Johnson's Farm, Liberty Jail, and especially Nauvoo. I'm sure it's not cheap but these tourist stops really draw in the crowds.

This mansion was built and then added to over the generations so it was interesting to see another example of colonial living. It was maintained in colonial times by slaves as are most of the big mansions we've seen and it's easy to see why slavery was such a major issue among the states for so long. Those who kept slaves built their estates with their labor and if they weren't available, it would have been difficult to have had the life style that they enjoyed.

It has been such a treat to be able to see these things that I've heard so much about over the years. I can see why the early settlers loved this country. This part of the nation is stunningly beautiful! As we crossed the bridges, we could see the large white houses nestled in the wooded hills and the harbors were full of yachts and sailboats.

Just so you don't think that it's all fun and games out here, I assure you that most days we are hard at it and arrive home at night thoroughly beat. Last night we didn't get home until after 8 and we left the apartment that morning at about nine so it was a long day. When we opened our apartment door after all those hours I said, "Oh, home sweet home.” Then I said, "Well, home, home. The sweet is back in Idaho but this will do for now!

This week we finished up our primary goal since my arrival in January. We wanted to visit or at least locate every sister on the ward roster and we did that.....all 215 of them! Some we only dropped by and knocked and left a bookmark since they weren't home and others we've visited several times with the hope of catching them. That initial job has been completed and now we are going to make up our lists and decide where to go from here. I guess our mission president is thinking of assigning us other wards to do the same thing for, so we'll get some direction and then move forward.

We’ve loved meeting the sisters and discovering just how wonderful they are. We have several that we visit weekly and others monthly and others who we pick up and take to concerts or Church activities. They are good to us and we try to be a friend to them. Most are new converts who are struggling with the challenges of being the only members in their families and trying to learn and understand the gospel better. We have a lady who is in a rest home and confined to a wheelchair. We have been teaching her each week and she reads the Book of Mormon and prepares questions for us.

We give her pamphlets to read also and last week we gave her a "For the Strength of Youth" pamphlet to give to one of her nurses who has teenagers and has shown some interest. When we arrived last Thursday, she had read the pamphlet and had questions about it. She asked, "Your church doesn't really expect the young people to be morally clean before marriage in today's world, does it?" I assured her that it did and that if a couple wasn't morally clean that they couldn't marry in the temple. She was amazed at that and hadn't realized that it was even feasible to teach it in our modern culture. We had a good discussion with her about that and other parts of the "For the Strength of Youth" pamphlet. She was so impressed by it even though she is 80 years old!

We love the ward we are attending. Everyone seems to accept each other. There is a large group of doctoral students who attend the University of Maryland and also a large group of blacks who are trying their best to get on their feet financially. There are others who have lived here their whole lives and witnessed the growth as the years have passed and some are new move-ins who are here working for the government at their dream jobs. Most of the people in the ward work at government jobs of some sort: everything from Black History non-profit assignments to lawyers clerking with the Supreme Court. In the gospel we are taught to reach out and treat each other as children of God and that's just what these people do.

Now for some family news. As many of you are aware, John and Laurel continue to question the proper diagnosis for Tessa. This past week her condition worsened and she was admitted to the hospital in Shanghai. A team of doctors came up with a slightly altered diagnosis from the Cincinnati group. The treatment requires taking steroids usually for long periods of time and so they do not want to go that route unless they are certain it is necessary. This Tuesday Tessa will be given a battery of tests that involve electrical impulses and are uncomfortable. She can't be given anything during these tests and so both John and Laurel will need to be there to help with it. These tests will provide evidence that they need to move forward with the steroids. They would appreciate all of our faith and prayers.

I know that Becky and Jeff need our prayers. Little by little they are finding answers to the challenges but it's going to take time and lots of adjustments. SaraKay also needs our prayers right now with learning the language.

March 31, 2012

Sister Wege and I just finished watching the first session of conference on the internet. We've been inviting people all week to tune in via the internet to hear a prophet's voice and it was so nice to take time this morning to enjoy it.

We've had a good week. One of Sister Wege's sisters, Maryanne, from West Virginia, arrived on Monday and we've been a threesome all week. Sister Wege is the only member in her extended family (parents and siblings.) She is one of 15 children. Last December Maryanne visited and spent a week helping at the Visitor's Center during the Christmas festival. The festival is similar to the one at Temple Square in which all the Washington D.C. Temple grounds are ablaze with Christmas lights. There was a nativity display in the Visitor's Center with 84 nativities as well as daily and nightly performances in the 500+ seat auditorium.

Last December over 90,000 guests attended the festival and Sister Wege was heavily involved so when her sister, Maryanne, came to visit, she helped out and made many friends among the missionaries who worked at the Visitor Center.

We took her everywhere with us including a trip into Washington D.C. to see some more sites. Maryanne is very interested in the Church and had lots of questions for Sister Wege so it was fun to sit in on that and see how she is finding answers. She left yesterday with an armful of books and brochures and the Book of Mormon. I'm sure it would be wonderful for Sister Wege to have even one of her siblings join her in Church membership. Her own children are members and have been raised in the Church. She has been such a trooper in taking every opportunity to teach the gospel to all of her extended family.

Because Maryanne was here, we attended the Friday morning training session for all Visitor Center missionaries, a meeting we don't normally attend. It was for the entire group of young sister missionaries as well as the senior couples assigned to the Center. The young missionaries are full of energy and enthusiasm and it really gave me a boost to participate.

For the training portion Elder Olsen, the V.C. director, discussed a problem that they have been having. He said that around conference time there is sometimes an effort to tie up the phone lines by people who purposely call in to the Call Center and ask questions that lead to entrapment of the Sisters who are manning the phones. This has happened other times and he was counseling the Sisters to be aware and not let these individuals tie up the lines. He said that they were to stay on task and teach the message, not discuss with these individuals deep concepts and beliefs that pull them away from their primary focus. The message they are to teach is: (1) Jesus is the Christ, (2) the Church has been restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, (3) there is a prophet on the earth today, and (4) the Book of Mormon is the word of God. Several of the Sisters had experienced this and others, who hadn't, were given the "red flags" of spotting these callers and then told to either hang up or repeat their message and get off as quickly as possible.

For my P-day activity we went to the Arlington Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. Although it was a blustery day it was still a wonderful opportunity to see this national shrine. I was totally unprepared for the hundreds of acres of graves of soldiers from every war starting with the Civil War and moving forward. Different areas were set aside for the different wars and many of the soldiers' wives were also buried there at their side.

Partway through our tour we saw a small flatbed wagon pulled by black horses and an armored guard on horseback. This wagon carried a flag-draped coffin. We learned that there are about 25 burials a day in the cemetery. It was such a beautiful place and very peaceful. There was a large memorial honoring the Kennedy's, and on the hilltop overlooking everything was the home of General Robert E. Lee whose property the U.S. government confiscated at the close of the Civil War. It has been so interesting to immerse myself in this early American history and see how it all ties together.

Our goal this week was to revisit some of our contacts but mainly to catch some of the sisters who we've yet to meet. We've gone on weekdays, weeknights, and Sundays, and just never been able to meet them. We've left bookmarks, notes, pass-along cards, and even goodies, but to no avail. We are moving on……We will continue to nurture those who are receptive but it is too expensive and time-consuming to continue going back time and time again with no hint of response.

We did finally get to one sister who we've tried repeatedly to visit. She agreed to an appointment and we were surprised at how sweet she was and at her testimony. She told us that when she was first baptized she was a faithful attendee but she started getting threatening notes telling her that the Church "didn't want any Blacks in it!" She told the missionaries about this after it had been going on for a while and the leadership eventually tracked down who was doing it but it left a bad taste in her mouth and she just dropped out of sight. Of course, we are trying to encourage her to return and hopefully she will.

So many of these sisters work long hours and on Sunday, lack transportation or money for the bus, are the sole providers for their families, and are the only members in their families, so it seems like everything works against them. We do our best to help them find solutions.

We have an 80-year-old sister in a rest home who we meet with. We have been trying to get the ward to take the sacrament to her each Sunday. Her home teacher drives right by the rest home enroute home so it seems to us that it is a reasonable request but it has been hard to get a commitment regarding it. Last Thursday Barbara said that they came on Sunday and she was so happy. She said, "I was overjoyed that they came and I could take communion for the first time in a long time!" (I guess we still have some work to do!)

I tried to call John this morning and he responded on e-mail that he and James were with Laurel's parents in Beijing and Laurel, Tessa, Eliza, and Emma are in Singapore. He said that when they got home on Tuesday, he would fill me in on what is going on with Tessa. I know that they appreciate our prayers.

April 13, 2012

We started out our week with zone conference which is always enjoyable. We had morning meetings and then one of the wards fed us lunch and then more meetings. It's so fun to get together with all the missionaries and renew those friendships. I come home rejuvenated! We got lots of good training. Some of the couples are going to be going home before the next zone conference so it's bitter/sweet to see them one last time.

The afternoon session of zone conference was a presentation by President and Sister Matsumori about tough questions that are going to be asked as we get closer to the elections. There is a web site that was created with those kinds of questions and they suggested that we should reference that site.

The questions are about polygamy, blacks and the priesthood, the temple garments, and other sensitive subjects. Several sample questions were given and how to spot insincere investigators and to extricate ourselves from those types of encounters. It was very well done and informative.

I guess the Romney candidacy is going to bring the Church "out of obscurity and darkness." The Church is doing all it can to tell its own story. This week we have continued tracking sisters and although most of them weren't home we composed a letter that invites them to join with us on Sundays and gives them our contact information. This is our third visit to most of these

homes so it will probably be our last unless they call and want to make contact. It's pretty disheartening to see how many of these sisters have dropped out of sight over the years. Most of them have neither home teachers nor visiting teachers; there isn't enough manpower to go around.

Sister Wege wants to take on more wards since we have been to each home at least once although there are still about 50 sisters who we haven't seen face to face. She expressed that and so this week President Matsumori assigned us the White Oak and Laurel Wards. We will work with the Relief Society presidents in those wards and do for them what we've done for the College Park Ward. I have mixed emotions about it. I have really bonded with the College Park people and I feel like there is a lot of fellowshipping yet to be done with the ones in that ward so to start over again in another ward makes me feel like we will not be as effective as we could be.

It's hard to know how it will turn out but for now we are planning to meet with the other presidents and talk through with them what we can help them with. We will also work one morning a week at the Family History Library which I'm happy to do. I've hated to get rusty: my training was difficult at the Idaho Falls Center and I don't want to lose what I learned.

Tomorrow we will be going to the White House for a tour. We will get to see both the East and West Wings. We had to get clearance and fill out all kinds of papers to get the okay for the tour. We're excited although it sounds like a busy weekend since it is the Cherry Blossom Festival. There is sure a lot to do in this area.

I'm grateful that the other senior missionaries for the most part are as anxious to see the sites as we are. We will be going to Monticello next week and then take an Amish tour on the 30th.

I was thinking the other day that there are some things I won't miss when I return to Idaho including paying to do my laundry and packing all my groceries from the parking garage to the lobby and elevator. And I won't miss sitting in traffic during rush hour.

But I will miss the explosion of color from flowering trees and bushes that is all around us. I've never seen such a beautiful spring. I always thought Provo had beautiful springs but I'm not sure anything can compare with here. I think I mentioned before that Friday night is the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath and so now that the weather is pleasant a lot of Jews walk to their worship services at their synagogue.

The men wear the small skull cap and a band around their waist with strings hanging down and some even wear the big black hats. Even the very young boys wear the skull cap. It's sweet to see them on their way to worship. This area has so many churches....probably at least one or two on every block. For Easter Sunday people were walking around in their Sunday best clothes and the women in Easter bonnets. My heart was warmed to see the Church parking lots full.

Have a wonderful week. I love each of you and pray for you each morning and night. I know that some of you are having your struggles but know that the Lord is aware of you and will be there for you in your hour of need. And of course, there's Dad. I think of him sometimes and wonder if he is in China or Boise, or Brazil, or Silver Springs, or some other place, watching the drama of our lives right now. I'm sure that he is aware of us. Love, Mom

April 13, 2012

We've had busy days of knocking on doors and becoming acquainted with a few more sisters from our College Park Ward. It's interesting to see the transformation of our feelings regarding some of these sisters. Several of them work full-time and so despite our efforts to find them home, they elude us. We call them and text them, too, but usually with no success. I even feel a little resentful towards them for making our lives difficult. This week we again tried to locate some of them and in almost every case we were pleasantly surprised when we did catch up with them. Most were lovely ladies dealing with life and its challenges and trying to survive. After just short visits my feelings changed from resentment to concern for them because of the challenges they face.

One of the things that I remember about Dad's time as bishop was that he was blessed with an endowment of love for the people in the ward. Sometimes when people would call him and need help, I felt a little resentful, especially if the person was especially needy emotionally and was always calling. Daddy never ran out of patience for these individuals and I knew it was because of his special calling as a bishop. I feel like I have that gift right now in my life with these sisters. I can see that they aren't perfect but the love I feel is

immediate and I recognize that this is a special gift of the Spirit.

The difficult thing about these less active sisters is that the one thing that could make a huge difference in their lives is living the principles of the gospel, but somehow in their distress they have pulled away from the Lord and are trying to do it their own way. This withdrawal from the Lord just removes them from the true source of strength and their lives become even more difficult to manage. Most have adopted the ways of the world and aren't keeping their covenants. Some married out of the Church and are trying to keep the friction in their marriages at a minimum. Many are single women who are supporting their families alone and who are living on the verge of poverty.

One other phenomenon that we run into all the time is women who were raised in Utah/Idaho in very active families. They tell us about their grandparents who served missions or their family members who served missions or of their Dad's who were bishops, etc. and then they admit that they don't share the fervor of their parents. I can only imagine how their families back home are praying for them. Knowing that keeps me going in this work because I would want someone to reach out and touch my child or grandchild if they lost their testimony. I am daily reminded that our testimonies are fragile and need constant nurturing.

One sister we met this week was a young mother of two. It was obvious that she was fine and good but she had married out of the Church and she and her husband had chosen to not embrace any religion rather than have contention in their marriage. She talked about some of the problems she is having with her 11-year-old son and I talked with her about the scouting program. I could see that she really wants this in his life but she wasn't going to cause any contention and so he was without religion and direction. My heart ached for her. Her entire family lives in Utah and is active in the Church and I could tell that she is beginning to see what she is missing. Hopefully we can influence her to find a way to come back and still keep her marriage strong.

Enough about missionary work. Today as we were riding around in horrendous traffic we started talking about Easter and what our family traditions were and I realized that this is really the first big holiday I've been away from home. I think Sister Wege and I were both a little homesick. We have a dinner appointment on Sunday and then we are attending a musical performance at the Visitor Center that evening so we'll have a nice holiday but it won't include an Easter egg hunt, kids dying and decorating eggs, and family gatherings.

I had a good visit with John earlier in the week. His in-laws are visiting and Laurel was still in Singapore with Tessa and Emma. There are still a lot of unknowns regarding Tessa's condition so he didn't know exactly how things are going to play out.

April 21, 2012

Remember the opening scene in "The Sound of Music" when a new young sister is entering the convent wearing a strange outfit and when Maria leaves the convent, she is wearing that same outfit? Well, our neighbors, the Hillsteads, who are full-time missionaries who work at the National Archives are leaving next week so all of us senior missionaries had a dessert party last night and we got to take some of their furnishings to use in our apartments. So.....it was even better than a garage sale! I got a carpet for my bedroom, a desk, towels, sheets and blankets, some Christmas decorations, a small table, two folding chairs, and some dishes.

Of course, when we leave, someone else will come take it from us but it's still fun to get a new look in my bedroom and living room carpet

We've had a busy week. We took on two new wards and so this week Sister Wege is hard at it filling out her forms and figuring out our visiting routes. I have been doing other things like preparing a letter that we are sending out to the women in the College Park Ward who we have never seen face to face. We attended Relief Society in the Laurel Ward and I ended up sitting by a cute young mother who just happened to be the sister of Marcus Oler, a young man who has lived in the Moreland Sixth Ward for the last five years! Those kinds of things happen all the time and it never ceases to remind me that it's a small, small world.

Tomorrow we are meeting with one of our new ward Relief Society presidents and we have ward rosters and the other tools of our trade. Both bishops have offered to help us with gas costs since we are putting a lot of miles on the car but I guess they feel like the service we offer is worth it.

We spent the morning inspecting young sister missionary's apartments and then did some visits

to some sisters in our new ward. One apartment building was so locked up that the only way we got in was through a large, multi-level parking garage. We slipped in behind a car that had activated the main garage entrance but upon getting in we realized that from the garage to the apartments there was another locked entrance so eventually we gave up and left. Sometimes we have to be a bit sneaky. The young Elders and Sisters do the same thing; it's nice when a person lives in a house instead of a locked complex.

We did have some success this week in locating three sisters who we had almost given up on. We also had a funny thing happen with one of the sisters. We had tried repeatedly to get into one apartment building and finally got in and then couldn't find the sister there so we turned her name in as one that we were going to send a letter. I composed a letter and we are mailing it in a last-ditch effort to make contact. We had turned in the list of names of women and the Relief Society president got back to us and said that this particular sister was active and teaches Primary and somehow we have just never crossed her path! We would have felt foolish if we had sent her a letter!

I don't know if I mentioned that on our P-day we went to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's estate. It reminded me of Mt. Vernon only it wasn't as large and well maintained. I have loved learning more about all of these founding fathers and their private and public lives.

The trip to get there was nearly 2 1/2 hours so it made for a long day. As a part of this tour, we also saw the slave quarters. The tour guide said that it is one of the great paradoxes of our country's history that our Founding Fathers were so determined to gain freedom and yet many of them were slaveholders until the day they died. In fact, Thomas Jefferson was so bankrupt that he sold 130 slaves to help pay off his many debts from his extravagant lifestyle. Seeing all of these sites is such a blessing! I remember Daddy saying that when he visited these places, he felt like he was on holy ground.

On Wednesday we worked at the Family History Library. President Matsumori gave permission since that was a part of my mission description. I still feel like such a novice but hopefully I can at least retain what I learned during my Idaho Falls Family History mission. After being at the FH Center for just one shift I really have come to appreciate the Idaho Falls Center. I think they have a lot going for them and that the training I got there is as good as or better than what is offered here.

It's almost bedtime. We've got meetings starting at 7:30 tomorrow morning with ward conference. Later we're meeting with the Relief Society president of another ward, and then a baptism at four and a program at the Visitor's Center tomorrow evening. Life is good. Hope all of you are doing well and finding joy in the journey. My prayers continue for each of you. I go to the temple weekly and I put family names on the prayer roll each week. I've been a little homesick but usually a good Sabbath helps me shake it off. How I love and miss each of you!

April 28, 2012

We've had a productive week of visiting, service projects, a shift at the Family History library, and a session at the temple. Now that we have taken on these two new wards, we are traveling more but we are meeting some wonderful people who are an inspiration. I continue to marvel at the goodness in the lives of the saints everywhere. I came on a mission to serve and bless the lives of the saints here but my life is so enriched by the people that I am meeting.

Last Sunday we got a new bishopric in the College Park Ward. We have enjoyed Bishop Bott and his counselors but there is also a lot of excitement with the new Bishop, Ryan Curtis. Since he spent the last couple of years on the high council, Sister Wege and I have hardly met him but we do know his wife and she is a sweetheart. It is so interesting to see the new converts respond to the changes. One woman, after viewing the proceedings in sacrament meeting, ask me what they were going to do with Bishop Bott now. I said that he would rejoin the congregation and serve in another capacity. She seemed surprised and a little skeptical that everyone was just going to go along with that after Bishop Bott had served so faithfully and was so loved as a bishop.

Last week in Relief Society a woman who had been called to lead the music left just before the opening song. When the R.S. presidency realized that she was gone, one of them jumped up and started leading the music, but then the woman returned and went up front and started leading and continued on as if nothing was wrong. Sometimes when I see those kinds of things I have to chuckle. Most of the established members just smile, and move on.

Another week we were having a short testimony meeting after the lesson and one woman got up and was describing the conflicts that she was having with her sister over her membership in the Church and a convert sitting close by just started talking to her right out loud saying, "Now don't you worry, honey. It's going to be alright." Then someone else chimed in and started telling about a situation in her life and another was giving advice and the Relief Society president had to get up and politely close the meeting. It's just something that would never happen in a ward in Utah or Idaho but out here you learn to roll with it.

We teach a young woman, Tigi, who has been a member for quite a while and when we went on Friday she was all dressed up and waiting for her ride to Church services at another Church. She said that she likes to go to that church on Friday because she likes something loud and swinging and the pastor even dances if he's in the mood. Then on Tuesday she goes to another church and by Sunday she is ready for something quieter so she comes to our Church. It never ceases to amaze me that these new converts bring so much of their former religion with them and don't realize that they need to put aside their old beliefs. I have thought so much of the Apostle Paul and of his efforts to keep the Church on track during his missionary travels. We are still fighting that battle. This young woman (34) also said that she wanted to "catch" one of those recommends because she wanted to get into that temple.

Despite their lack of understanding of Church doctrine and protocol these black sisters have so much faith and goodness in them and we see answers to their prayers all the time. Tigi saw two miraculous answers to her prayers last week and she was free with her praise and gratitude for these tender mercies. Telling her complete story would be impossible here but her life is full of crazy situations and yet we continue to see the hand of the Lord in her life. Recently her mother, who was caring for her (she suffered a stroke recently) decided that she was going to return to Sierra Leone to visit family and so Tigi's brother arrived from Sierra Leone to take care of her. We learned that the house Tigi lives in is her brother's but he left the country because the law was after him. I guess he was gone long enough that he can return now. We come across these kinds of situations all the time and we pretty much just go with the flow and don't get involved. I see enough of the challenges of missionary work to think that the Brethren in Salt Lake probably lose sleep over some of the situations that develop as new cultures and peoples are brought into the fold.

One of the terms we are hearing more and more about is "real growth". It means that even though the number of baptisms might be increasing, the real growth of the Church has to be measured by those who continue to stay active and progress to the temple. This is the saddest thing about my job is seeing how many sisters joined the Church and quite soon thereafter, they completely fall away. Not only are they not attending any longer but they are antagonistic towards the Church and want nothing to do with it. Even though we reach out and offer to help answer questions or concerns, they don't want to be bothered.

And then on the other hand we'll visit a sister who is wonderful and solid and has raised her family in the Church and we find out that she is a convert.

A few weeks ago when we had our White House tour, we went as a group to a restaurant together. There were four of us single sisters, our district leader, his wife, and our Asian guide. As we visited over lunch, we discovered that of the seven of us, only two were life-time members. Everyone else was a convert! I could hardly believe it because all of these missionaries are so solid and dedicated. It helped me realize that although many fall away; many others go on in their new-found religion and enjoy the full blessings of the gospel in their lives and that of their families.

At our district meeting the other day we were talking about the assignment our district leader and his wife have in teaching the Addiction Recovery Class in our stake. Before we finished talking about it, we realized that of the six of us, four had children who were addicted to something including drugs, gambling, or pornography. It was stunning and reaffirmed how important it is that the Church offers these programs. It made me appreciate my fellow missionaries more because if I was dealing with that at home I'm not sure I would feel like I could leave on a mission. Some of them expressed that they were serving because they needed special answers to prayers and they were hoping that the Lord would honor their sacrifices and grant the desires of their hearts in righteousness. I love serving with such stalwart saints!

One thing that I've enjoyed about this mission is that when we get together for our senior missionary activities, whether it be a tour or a dinner together, we inevitably talk about our missionary experiences and some of the miracles

we are seeing. It seems like we would want to talk about other things but everyone is so involved in the work that that is what they have on their minds and want to discuss and share. Of course, this mission has archive missionaries, temple missionaries, Visitor Center missionaries, member support, office staff, and proselyting couples, so it is a mix of many kinds of experiences. Just learning about all the expense and logistics of keeping this Church's missionary program functioning is inspiring! I think we are all grateful and humbled to add our sacrifices despite how small or insignificant they may be.

Several of you have asked about Tessa. John, who was playing Mr. Mom while Laurel conducts the stake youth conference in Hong Kong, said that they are seeing improvement. She seems to be in less pain and the therapy is helping her walk although she mostly gets carried. Laurel will leave in about 10 days for a week in Singapore where doctors will evaluate and continue with the steroid treatments.

May 5, 2012

I just got home from a truly marvelous experience! Elder Bednar was going to be in the area for leadership training and President Matsumori asked if there was any chance that he would consider talking to the full-time missionaries while he was here. What came of this request was a three-mission conference (D.C. South, D.C. North, and Baltimore Missions) and the chance to spend three and a half hours being taught by Elder Bednar!

Accompanying him were one of the new members of the Presiding Bishopric, an area authority, and Steven Snow who has been called to be the Church Historian when Marlin Jensen is released in October.

In preparation for the conference, we were given two of Elder Bednar's talks to study and then after the other General Authorities had given short remarks Elder Bednar took the podium and we were masterfully taught for the next three hours. He first asked the missionaries what they had learned from the talks. Hands went up all over the place and for the next 1 1/2 hours Elder Bednar responded to these comments. Then he asked if any of them had questions for him or his traveling companions about their callings. He prefaced that with the counsel that he didn't want questions that were inappropriate or "dopey." He told them that they may never be in a situation again in their lifetime when they would have the opportunity to have such a personal exchange with a member of the Twelve. Again, hands shot up. Finally, he asked them to comment on what they had learned. It was so sweet to see these young Elders and Sisters relishing this opportunity to be taught by an Apostle.

Because of the length of the meeting, Elder Bednar would have us stand and stretch. One time he asked that the senior missionaries all stand. We were seated in reserved seats in the back of the 500-person auditorium and had been instructed to let the young missionaries do the asking so we were just sitting back there soaking it all in. When he asked us to stand, he addressed us as a group. He said that he knew some of us were missing baby blessings, grandchildren's baptisms, and graduations and even a wedding or two. He said that the best thing that we could do for our grandchildren at this time in our lives was to be gone. He said that we would see the day when our posterity would "rise up and call us blessed" for our sacrifices in the mission field. He said that our example would go down through the generations and our posterity would serve missions because of our example.

By that time, of course, we were all weeping. It was such a beautiful promise and being thanked publicly by a servant of the Lord was very humbling. If there is anything that I have learned it is that everyone out here has made sacrifices to be here and no one has a perfect situation back home.

It was a joyous occasion to be a part of and filled my cup to overflowing. After that session Sister Wege and I walked to the temple and went through a session before returning home. Tonight, we're singing with the ward choir in a talent show number at a scout fundraiser. We continue to visit and build those proverbial "relationships of trust".

I'm pleased with how the work is going. I'm finding answers to some of the problems that I'm dealing with and I know that the Lord is mindful of me. I feel that although our family is not without struggles at this time, I have a calm assurance that as we pray for each other and do the best that we can, that the Lord will help us weather the storm. I know that John and Laurel have been under tremendous stress lately with Tessa's condition and all the other demands on them. I have been so grateful that Becky and Jeff are

close at hand and that the two families and the 12 cousins can be there for each other.

Although SaraKay's letters are short, I think that she is getting acclimated and dealing with the language better all the time. I'm excited to get to talk with her on Mother's Day. Although I hesitate making major announcements in this weekly letter, Paul and Jenny gave me permission to do so. Jenny is pregnant and the baby's due date is on Dad's birthday, December 8th. What happy news for the Midland Larsen's. Jenny has been quite sick and so she is simplifying her life as much as an early morning seminary teacher and mother of five little ones can.

I got a call from Marci's mother who is here helping with a new grandbaby: Marci's brother's fifth! I will be able to visit with Karen on Monday evening. She is so sweet to call and find time for a visit!

May 13, 2012

I'm sitting here waiting for SaraKay's call. She is going to call me on Skype so I'm hoping that I can receive it without any problem. I've heard from several of you already yesterday and today so it has been such a lift for me. I appreciate everyone making this a wonderful day.

Today in our investigator's Sunday School class we were talking about the Holy Ghost. It is always interesting to hear the gospel principles taught very simply and carefully so these new members can grasp the truths. One woman who was recently baptized said that ever since she was confirmed and they told her to "receive the Holy Ghost, that she has felt His comforting spirit. I was so touched by her comments that after the block of meetings I approached her to visit and she told me more about her situation. She is from Nigeria and she and her children were here in the U.S. but there were a lot of problems and eventually they realized that the only way out of the problems was for her children to return to Nigeria and for her to stay here. This type of situation is fairly common among people who are trying to legally immigrate so this wasn't the first time I've heard of this.

She said that she was very worried about being separated from her children but that whenever she feels the loneliness coming on, she just prays and she always has this wonderful spirit assure her that her children are okay and that she is not alone. In fact, she said that sometimes she feels like her apartment is full of people who she can't see but she knows are there curing her of her loneliness.

One of the most wonderful things about watching these new members is to see the Lord's promises fulfilled in their lives. They are given promises as they join the Church and the Lord fulfills them in miraculous ways! Some of these people have such great faith and deal with tremendous problems but they just keep on keeping on. It's inspiring.

I wanted to tell you about a sweet but kind of humorous experience we had this week. There is a lady that we work with who is quite a character. She is about 5'6" and weighs maybe 90 pounds. Her problem is her teeth. She has huge teeth and at one time some of them had diamonds embedded in them. The last several months they have started abscessing and she is a health nut and so she keeps trying to get rid of the infection with natural means. Some Sundays she wouldn't come to church because her mouth was so sore. Sometimes she soaks some fabric in some herbal solution and puts it in her mouth and comes to church and when she talks it's this muffled sound but she hates to miss church so she puts up with it. Well things have been so bad that she finally decided that she needed to go to a regular dentist and we took her two weeks ago for a pre-op exam and she was given some antibiotic and told to come back this week to have all her teeth extracted. We have really encouraged her to get this done but we also realize that finances are an issue and so we are trying to encourage but not push too hard.

We had helped her prepare her mother's name for baptism and last Sunday Darlene got a limited use recommend and was so excited to go to the temple to do the baptism for her mother. She had her card and we told her exactly what time we would pick her up so that we could be to the baptistery at the time the ward youth were scheduled. When we went to pick her up, she didn't come to the door for a long time. When she came, she was all disheveled and wrapped in a big rug. She said that she would hurry and get ready to go so I went back to the car to wait with Sister Wege. We waited and waited and finally Darlene came out. Now I should have prefaced this account with mentioning that Darlene works at a thrift store and every Sunday she arrives at church totally decked out with colorful fancy suits and shoes and hats to match. And I do mean hats! As a part of her compensation, she is permitted to wear whatever she likes from the store and so she has a different outfit each

Sunday with no repeats and she looks really snazzy. We often comment on how classy she is and she loves that and laughs it off but she is kind of famous for her outfits.

So.....when Darlene emerges from her home, she is wearing a beautiful white fancy suit and on her head is a big white hat with the brim turned up with a fancy white bow. The only thing that was out of style was her flip flops and they flipped and flopped and so it was rather difficult to not notice them. We were running late so Sister Wege dropped me off at the temple door and we hurried in together, flipping and flopping. I had noticed as we were in the car enroute that Darlene sounded strange and then as we walked into the temple she was holding on my arm and swaying a little and I thought that if I didn't know better I would think that she was drunk. In the car as I listened to her, I thought something was amiss but I didn't know how to signal inconspicuously to Sister Wege my concern. As we walked in the temple entrance with Darlene holding on to me and swaying this way and that and flip flopping this way and that we were quite a spectacle. We got past the main desk and as we started down the wide hallway where people often congregate there was a huge crowd of patrons visiting and milling around.

As we drew near all eyes turned on us. Quite a sight as I tried to hold up Darlene and everyone looked from the big, billowy hat to the flip flops and then to her swaying and tried to figure out what this apparition was. Luckily some of them thought she was ill and was making the best of her opportunity to be in the temple but we still got a lot of stares and I just held my head high, kept walking, and made our way to the recorder's office to get the temple names that we needed. Despite our strange appearance we did get in and soon were being escorted to the baptistery.

Our next challenge was for her to get into the baptismal outfit. The D.C. Temple has small onesie's that they give the unendowed sisters to wear under the baptismal jump suits and so we got one for Darlene and I got her situated in a locker stall and closed the locker door so that she could get into the baptismal outfit.

Pretty soon I stood at the door and ask if she was about ready and she said that she couldn't figure out what was going on with the onesie. She opened the door and it looked like she was literally in a strait jacket. She had somehow got the onesie twisted and it was up over her head and behind her arms and in a terrible mess. I think she was so out of it with her meds that she didn't know which way was up so I had to untangle her from her predicament and help her get into it and ready for the ordinance.

When I finally got her ready to go, I breathed a sigh of relief. Soon she was sitting waiting her turn in the font and since she was only doing one name, they fit her in and soon her mother's baptism was done. When the confirmation was over, Darlene had the biggest smile you could imagine. She hugged the men who had performed the confirmation and hugged us and hugged the temple workers and was so happy and kept saying, "I got my mom in the temple. I got my mom in the temple!" By that time I was so frazzled that I had to shake myself and remind myself of what a wonderful experience it was and how happy Darlene was to have had this opportunity.

Whenever I think back of the funny looks on the patrons in the temple as we walked past, I almost laugh out loud! If I've learned anything on my mission it is that the Lord loves his children and will take them where they are and bring them gently along. As for us life-time, pioneer stock members, we need to give new converts room to grow and not expect them to do everything the Mormon way right at first. I've seen such faith in these sisters and know that their prayers are heard just as well as mine. I'm so grateful to be a part of these sister's lives!

I got in my call to SaraKay and she told me some interesting things that I have written down and want to share with the family next week but it is late and tomorrow will start early. Just let me say that she is doing beautifully, the language is coming, she is grateful to be serving and she can't think of anywhere she would rather be than on a mission!

May 19, 2012

I wanted to give you a report on my phone call with SaraKay. Her mission president gave the missionaries permission to Skype for an hour so that made it really nice. SaraKay called the day before to set up the 5:00 time so I double checked with Sister Wege and made sure that I knew how to get on Skype.

Sister Wege decided to go for a walk about 3:30 so she left and I was here alone worrying the whole time that I wouldn't be able to get Skype to work. About five-to-five Sister Wege arrived home and I breathed a little easier knowing that she was

here in case of an emergency. Sure enough, right at five o'clock the phone rang and I frantically tried to get my connection to come through but it just wouldn't. I called to Sister Wege and she came in and looked at the screen and couldn't figure out what was going on. All at once a call came in but it was Mike and Marci. It only rang once and then the Skype call rang in and I was easily able to make the connection: there was SaraKay with her big smile! (Later that evening I talked to Mike and he said that he had just sat down to call me and just as it rang he realized that it was exactly five o'clock and so he hung up and called later.)

Just a few notes from her call: The language is finally starting to come. It has been such a challenge to not be able to express herself or completely understand what is going on in a conversation. Even now her vocabulary is limited to gospel phrases and she is looking forward to learning enough words that she can feel relatively confident in a normal conversation. The people tell her that she doesn't have much of an accent and that her Portuguese is good. She is enjoying good health. She said their daily diet of rice and beans must be good for her because she hasn't had any sickness at all.

She feels like she is learning so much and is being stretched in so many ways. Her favorite activity is her personal study time and immersing herself in the scriptures. She says that they are teaching people who know the gospel is true, but there are so many obstacles keeping them from baptism such as smoking, drinking, not being married to the person they're living with, no car, and no money.

The most frustrating thing is when people just don't care about the gospel message, don't care to better themselves, and don't care if they are going nowhere.

She said that the Brazilian MTC was probably the most amazing experience of her life! She was the only girl in a district of about 10-15 Elders and they all became such great friends during the six weeks they were there together.

The last night before she left for the field, she was in a class that was delayed so she missed going to the snack time get-together and was so disappointed that she would miss saying good-bye to these great Elders. As she left the classroom and moved into the hall, all of her district was there to say good-bye. They lined the narrow hall and had been waiting for her outside the classroom. She was so grateful and touched that they cared.

She said that leading the MTC Choir for the firesides was another highlight. The biggest challenge of that was trying to get the entire choir to pronounce the words to the song the same. There was such a mixture of countries represented in the choir and everyone had their own way of saying the words. All in all, it was an amazing experience!

The hardest thing about being a missionary has been the long days and the constant pressure to be "up" and to keep reaching out to others and always be encouraging and optimistic. I think that was a sentiment that most of the rest of you expressed, too. She said that P-days are not nearly long enough to get everything done. She also said that it gets boring teaching the same thing over and over because of her limited language skills.

She said that at the last transfer there was a new sister who arrived and that when she looked into her face, she saw the same bewildered look that she had had just two months earlier and she went out of her way to tell her that it would get better and not to get too discouraged. Her first companion was Brazilian and although it was difficult, she feels like it was the best situation and really forced her to speak Portuguese. She decided early on that she was going speak the language even if people laughed at her and they did but she just kept trying and has gradually improved.

Finally, she rehearsed with me a talk that someone gave at the MTC that has helped her. She said the speaker referred to the phrase, "the mysteries of Godliness". There are a lot of meanings to this phrase but the speaker gave a different interpretation that has been helpful. He said that the Lord knows every person that the missionaries are contacting and knows them well enough to know what is important to them. He can reveal through the Holy Spirit what the missionaries need to say to have the best opportunity to touch their hearts and lead them into truth. These "mysteries" can be the key to conversion of people who could not be reached any other way.

She said that in this same talk they were reminded that even the Savior suffered rejection during his ministry and that we should not think that we should be spared having to walk that path ourselves.

Lastly SaraKay said that she misses a lot of things from her life before her mission. She misses her music and her friends and wishes that I would include information about them. I guess I've got to go on Facebook more and find out what's going on back in Moreland, Idaho.

As far as life in D.C. this past week it has been more of the same; lots of phone calls, visits, driving around, temple sessions, a shift at the Family History Center, and typing up reports. The weeks fly by. I can hardly believe that I've been here for five months! Sister Wege and I are getting along great and feel our situation is a good one.

When I got my Mother's Day calls, I couldn't help but be grateful that although we have our challenges, everyone is doing well. I would love to be with Steph and Linds and Steve and Bonnie as they graduate Josh and Rachel this month. It doesn't seem possible that they are ready to leave the nest and be out on their own! They are both such good kids and I'm immensely proud of them!

May 26, 2012

I've had Daddy on my mind these last few weeks. Being here in the mission field and a part of a large group of senior missionaries, most of whom are married, I often think of Daddy and how much he would have enjoyed this opportunity of serving a mission. On the other hand, I've thought that some things about it would be hard for him. I've watched other couples and I can see their struggles to adjust to the inevitable changes that come with a mission. The men at the Visitor's Center struggle because for the first time in their lives they aren't involved in their careers and having the demands of that pressing on them. Sometimes they feel like they aren't as busy as they would like to be so that's a struggle for them, too. Being together 24/7 is also challenging.

One time when we were touring with a married couple the wife got after the husband about something and later she said to me, "I'll bet you'd never do that to your husband." I told her that life is pretty much the same for all of us and irritations come and I suspect that if Daddy was still with me that we'd have our squabbles, too. When I am involved with the other couples, I miss Daddy the most. I just wish that these couples could have known him and what a great guy he was!

Of course, with the Memorial weekend upon us, I'm thinking about his grave and wishing that I was there to clean it off and put some flowers on it for the weekend. Steve and Bonnie said that they were going to make the trip and decorate his grave so I appreciate that. I know that both of the Cache Valley families are up to their ears with graduation festivities this week and Steph and Linds are hosting the big dinner before the Senior Ball. Bonnie said that Rachel has a bad case of senioritis!

With the coming of the holiday weekend the traffic here is horrendous and the grocery store this morning was like a zoo with so many people. I sat for a while waiting for Sister Wege to pick me up and I felt like I was sitting on the sidelines at the Eastern Idaho State Fair with the world passing before me in review. This melting pot of humanity creates an interesting mix of languages, cultures, and dress. A person can get away with wearing about anything since everyone else looks bizarre too! It does give me a sense of freedom that is kind of fun. We took today off and have been shopping and puttering around the apartment getting ready for Sunday and Monday when we are having a cookout with the Archive missionaries who have the day off, too. We're going to a nearby park and gardens and keeping our celebration small.

This past week has been a busy one. It can be summed up with three words: visits, visits, and more visits. Covering three wards has definitely been a challenge, especially with learning names and making some connection with the 500 Relief Society sisters in the three wards.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday we visited about 60 homes (not everyone was home), took a lady to the temple, took a lady to the Family History Center for our Wednesday morning shift, attended district meeting, phoned about 25 people setting up appointments, visited three women in rest homes, delivered a sister home from the hospital, tried to locate four new move-ins, and attended two mission correlation meetings. Tomorrow we'll attend a ward council meeting, go to the three-hour block of meetings, and then rush across town to attend a funeral before coming back to a fireside of a new move-in from Ghana.

It's felt good today to take some time off to put my room in order and get the laundry done. With no yard work to do, no flower beds to tend, no garden to weed, no grandkids to have come visit, I have a lot of time to take care of all these other commitments and I'm grateful to do it. Although some days I feel ready to drop, everyone tells me

to enjoy it....it will pass in a hurry. In fact, this next transfer some of my very favorite people are leaving for home. How I hate to see them go!

June 2, 2012

We came home early today because of extreme thunderstorm warnings and a tornado watch throughout much of the area. About a half an hour after we arrived home the skies opened and dumped a huge amount of rain on the area. From our 10th floor apartment we can see out over the treetops and it was so misty and stormy that most of our beautiful view was totally blocked from sight. Anyway, we are feeling snug and warm and enjoying a quiet night at home.

Our week has been full of ups and downs. With the two new wards we took on we are churning out the numbers. This part of my job is my least favorite. We chart our course, visit as many sisters as we can get around to in a day, and then record what the results of our visits were.

As you can imagine most of our visits are noted as: "Not home. Left card." This is pretty frustrating since we already know that most of them won't be home because most of the women here who don't have young families work out of the home and so we do a lot of knocking and very little visiting. Last Tuesday for instance we visited over 20 women. That's a lot of traveling, in and out of the car, walking, and leaving notes. In the midst of this effort, we do discover if someone has moved or, if another family member is home, we can gather some information regarding their work schedules. There is always the problem with people who don't want to talk to us or tell us any contact information so we just move on and go to the next address. Following this cursory go-through, we go back, refer to our notes, and decide who to see the second time through.

Personally, I would rather make appointments and see less homes but more women. I want the sisters to have prior notice that we are coming so they can feel good about our visit and not get caught off guard. I also would like to respond to some of the information we gather such as who has had a baby, who has had surgery, who needs help moving, etc. and not just stay on our schedule. So in the midst of this, we have struck a compromise so that both of us get some of what we like and feel good about our approach.

Once we have gone through the Relief Society roster once in both new wards, we will go back and try again. This process eventually will yield a short list of monthly visits. This list becomes our walking orders for each month and this is the part that I like because we begin to form relationships with the sisters and minister.

One of my favorite times of the week is our session at the Family History Center. It is so peaceful and there usually aren't a lot of patrons so I have been able to do some of my own research. I'm enjoying using what I learned at the Center in Idaho Falls and feeling a little more secure in the different tools available. I also enjoy that on Friday morning we go to the temple with one of our sisters and that is a time of strengthening.

I am always amazed at how the Lord provides for me as I know he does for the other missionaries. This past week was a good example of His tender mercies. As I mentioned in last week's letter, I have been feeling badly that I wasn't home to decorate Daddy's grave although mentally I knew that Daddy would understand and it wouldn't be a big deal to him. Emotionally it was weighing on my mind and I headed into the weekend a little down. When Steve and Bonnie called and said that they were going to make the trip to Blackfoot and had some flowers for Dad's grave, I was so grateful.

Monday morning, I received a sweet note from Gary saying that Mindy and Emily had arranged some flowers and that they had gone over as a family to decorate Grandpa and Grandma Larsen's graves as well as Dad's. It was such a thoughtful gesture as well as a touching e-mail and I really appreciated it.

Then when the day was almost over, I received a phone call from one of my high school friends, Renee Hawkley. She had been at the Thomas/Riverside Cemetery last year looking for family history information and we met her there and helped her find the headstones that she was looking for. This year she was in the area again and she called when she arrived at the cemetery and ask me where Steve's grave was. I directed her over the phone and she took a picture of both the front and the back of the headstone and e-mailed it to me! She said that the year she was on her mission she had felt so badly that she couldn't decorate her husband, Dan's, grave and she knew how I would be feeling. It really touched me.

I have had Josh and Rachel on my mind this week and already received a few pictures from Josh's graduation ceremonies. I'm sure Steve took lots of

Rachel too and hopefully we'll see some posted. I loved being with Laurel last year for her graduation as well as for Katie and then Sam's the year before. These are such joyous times and so fun to see them with their friends and sense the wonderful bonds that had been formed over the years. It's a fun, heady time and there will never be another time like it in their lives! But of course, at the time you're in the middle of it you don't know that and it isn't until years later that you realize just how carefree and special those events were! Congratulations to Rachel and Josh!

June 6, 2012

We've had a fun week. The highlight was when the entire mission went to a Washington Nationals vs. New York Mets baseball game in the big stadium in D.C. I guess this is an annual event and although we had to wear our missionary clothing and name tags it still was fun to gather with the entire mission.

We rode the subway to get to the stadium although we were warned that the crowds after the game are horrendous, especially in the Metro. After the game we hung around the stadium to visit and we thought that we had waited a reasonable amount of time before we got into the tunnel to board the Metro. But, when we made our way in the midst of the crowd to the subway cars and then moved with the crowd into the car nearest us, we were literally packed like sardines. I was standing pressed against other people and didn't even have a pole to hang onto. I just swayed back and forth with the movement of the car since we were packed so tightly that I couldn't possibly fall over.

Everyone was cracking jokes and laughing and every time we'd stop at another stop and the doors would open some wise guy would say, "Hop in" even though it was obvious that there wasn't room for one more body to board. In fact, when we all first got in, we couldn't get the doors to close and one of the subway workers came over and pushed on the crowd enough to get the doors to close. It was the funniest thing to see how in that situation everyone started visiting and that cool, nonchalant attitude that most people have while riding public transportation was totally gone. Everyone was having a great time! It made for a fun finish to an already great activity.

We had a funny thing happen on Wednesday after we spent the morning at the Family History Center. The last few weeks we have taken Darlene Seldon with us and she has been researching her family with the hope that she can take through some of their names once she gets her recommend to receive her own endowments. Darlene is an interesting lady and no one in the ward is completely sure of just what and who she is but one thing we all know is that she loves the Church and her association in it and she wants so badly to go to the temple. She is taking a temple preparation class each Sunday and so when we pick her up on Wednesday and transport her a half an hour to the Family History Center, we visit with her about what she is learning in her class.

She told us last week that they gave her a book about the temple and that she isn't supposed to talk about the temple with just anyone. She said that she keeps that book very close to her and never leaves home without it in case someone should come across it and read it. She also said that she was glad that the temple had a fence around it because you never know who might try to get in there and it is holy ground and most people aren't holy.

She went further and said that the Bishop told the class members that if they didn't respect the temple that they were going to get "exhaled" from the Church and prosecuted. (I think she meant excommunicated) She also said that they read scriptures in the temple class and that one of her favorite books of scriptures was "The Book of Pearls". She also said that she fully supports our new bishop and that she sustained him when they said, "All in favor, show by the right hand. All oppose, raise the left."

By this time, I was laughing so hard that I couldn't contain myself and she is laughing at me for laughing at her and she just kept talking and entertaining us with her enthusiasm for her temple class. When we finally dropped her off, we both just shook our heads and admitted that we were glad it was the Bishop issuing the recommend and not us. One more thing she said as she was getting out of the car: "You ladies remember to eat right. Remember you are what you eat so be sure you eat a lot of fruits and vegetemples.

She may not have meant that pun but it's sometimes hard to understand her because she has a unique way of speaking. I started laughing again and was still laughing when we arrived at our next appointment. Never a dull moment.

Let me tell you about our Gospel Essentials Class last Sunday. The teacher divided us into groups to

discuss questions about prayer. Each group chose a spokesman. The class is composed of investigators, new members, and missionaries. Following the discussion time each group reported on their findings. Since most groups chose a new convert to be spokesman it really got everyone involved in the lesson. It was wonderful! Following the reports the teacher asked if anyone wanted to tell of a time when prayer helped them. Several hands went up: one fellow had been knifed during a robbery and had been spared only because he had a comb in his front shirt pocket which deflected the blade a few inches away from a major artery.

Another class member told of overdosing on drugs and how it was prayer that pulled her through. Still another person told of being in a situation where he only had a few coins in his pocket to live on and how he prayed and he found a ten-dollar bill in the Metro that held him over for a few days until he could get some money.

I sat there thinking that those responses were a little different from what I would hear in Moreland Sixth Ward if that question was asked. These new members are putting the Lord's promises to the test and finding out for themselves that His promises are sure. It's such a privilege to work with them.

Our work of finding, fellowshipping, and strengthening continues. We usually start off each day with a list of between 10-25 names. We drive from one house to the other, knocking on doors, talking to neighbors, and trying to have some "touch" with the women listed on our rosters.

Some we have made appointments with and some of them "dog" us as the young Elders would say. Some are home and we usually have a wonderful visit. But, some we can hear on the other side of the door looking out of their peep hole and letting us stand there until we get tired and leave. We try not to take it personally. We figure if we have at least one or two good visits a day we are doing okay and we feel rewarded. Many times, when we finally catch up with a lady who has been evasive, we are pleasantly surprised by her goodness and desires to do what is right. We are nearing the end of our marathon of visiting the houses of each sister at least once. This is in our three assigned wards so it has been a huge feat! We always leave a card with the LDS Logo on it and a note telling them that we dropped by and we're sorry we missed them. We have our contact information on the card with the hope that they will call us and let us set up an appointment to meet at their leisure. I think I mentioned before that very few actually call us back and that one time we did get a phone call and we were so pleased and went right over only to find that she was mentally deranged and had major issues. We run into some unusual situations but we try not to be judgmental. I have to say, "Hats off!" to the wonderful stalwarts of the wards who are strong and committed and so willing to extend the hand of fellowship to everyone.

June 17, 2012

We just arrived home from an Alex Boye concert at the Visitor's Center. He is a regular guest performer with the Washington D.C. Mormon Choir. He did an awesome job and it was a wonderful musical program with about 400 people attending. The Visitor's Center is certainly used for a lot of missionary work in this area. Tomorrow night Alex is going to speak at the monthly fireside entitled, "Why I Believe". The missionaries can attend but they have to bring an investigator or newly baptized convert. It's always an inspiring night.

This week has been full of sweet times. As we were planning out our visits for this week, we decided that we would give Holly Brewer one more try. This is a lady who we met months ago when she was moving into a beautiful home in the area around the University of Maryland. She is a professor of History and very involved with school. At that time she said that she was too busy and to check back. Well, time after time we did but we never found her home and we didn't have a current phone number. One time two young boys answered the door and although their mother was gone, we did get a phone number. Later we called and left messages but never did connect. We were about ready to write this lady off after so much effort and nothing to show for it.

Well, I called one last time and she didn't answer but I left another message that we were going to be in the area and would drop in to visit. Of course, neither Sister Wege nor I thought we'd actually get a visit but we went anyway.

When Holly answered the door, she gave us a big smile and welcomed us in. This began an hour-long visit in which she told us all about her and her mother (who is living with them) and their history with the Church. Holly had been raised without the gospel in her home because her

mother asked for her name to be taken off the records of the Church. All of Holly's aunts and her grandmother were very active and every chance they got they took her to Church with them and even got permission to have her baptized.

Long story short, Holly grew up, married a nonmember, and to this point in their life with a 14-year-old daughter and two scout age sons, she and her husband had been talking about how they had shortchanged their children in not at least espousing some religion. So, she wanted us to contact the scout leader and the YW leader and she was going to visit with her husband about investigating the LDS faith.

It seemed too good to be true. We were so happy to finally meet this lady and to realize that she was being prepared and was teachable. It was so cool! I guess the moral of this story is "never give up. Never, never."

The next sweet thing that happened was in relation to Darlene Seldon. Each Wednesday we take Darlene to the Family History Library with us while we do our shift. This is no small effort since we are only about 10 minutes from the Center but when we take Darlene we drive for a half an hour in the opposite direction to get her and drive back after our shift to deliver her home. All in all it adds almost two hours to our shift. Last week as we were on our way to pick her up, I questioned whether this effort was worth it. It just seemed like a lot of time and gas for one little lady who I wasn't sure even understood the significance of family history work.

Well, I'm sitting beside her at the computer and we are trying to enter all of her information on new.familysearch.org. I am showing her where the ordinance work will be recorded when she gets the work done for her ancestor's. She did the baptism for her own mother about a month ago and Sister Wege and I did the initiatory and endowment for her. She asked if her mother's ordinance work would be shown on the Church’s records. I assured her that it would. We put in her name and sure enough, it pulled up her mother's name and all the ordinance dates. As I smiled and turned to say something like, "I told you so!" there was Darlene in her wild little straw hat with her red horned-rimmed glasses (one lens totally missing.) She was staring at her mother's name and big tears were coursing down her cheeks. I repented right there and then and knew that we would continue going to fetch Darlene as long as she wanted to go.

The next day we had on our list of visits a sweet lady who isn't a member but whose son is. She was retired but during her career she was a teacher in an inner-city school that was notorious for having tough kids. The Relief Society president asked if we would visit with her since she cares for her grown son who is severely depressed and has other emotional issues. We had been back over the last few months numerous times but she would never let us in so we weren't surprised when she again said that it wasn't a good time. We got into the car to leave and Sister Wege was working with the GPS when the grown son came out of the house and right up to our car. He asked if we had time to visit with him and we said that we did. He sat on the grass by the curb and the car and talked and talked. We did our best to reassure him and bear witness of the power of the Atonement. We were grateful that we were in the right place at the right time for him even though we felt that we were in the wrong place at the wrong time with his mother.

Another visit we almost didn't make turned out to be a blessing. We tried repeatedly to visit a woman who recently emigrated from Ghana. She works shift work and is seldom at Church but her boys usually come and her husband helps teach the Gospel Essentials class. We got an appointment and had a good visit with her. Just as we were leaving her husband mentioned that she has been suffering with pains in her abdomen and he didn't know if we knew someone who could help. They have little money and no insurance. We did some phoning, located a walk-in clinic, lined up an appointment and spent the morning with her at the doctor's. Sister Wege picked up the tab for most of it and they were so grateful.

As you can see by these examples, it has been a rewarding week for us. It's joyous to feel that the Lord is working through us to serve these sisters. Life is good.

June 24, 2012

I've got a few minutes this morning before leaving for my meetings. Mike and Tim are here for the weekend and have been staying with Marci's brother, Greg, and his family. Several months ago they decided to make a trip to D.C. for a dental convention. Originally Marci and Mike were both going to come but eventually Mike backed out of the convention, Marci decided to spend some time with her family in Utah, and Tim, who was along for the sight-seeing, decided to bring a girl, Jenn, who he has been dating. With the mission

president's permission, I took a couple of days off and we have been in D.C. seeing the sights. Jenn has never been in this area before although Mike and Tim both have. It has been a whirlwind trip. We've ridden the Metro to and from D.C. and visited several Smithsonians, monuments, the Holocaust Museum, and "The Museum of Crime and Punishment." It has been so hot here, too, and so we were battling that. We have had so much fun going to all of these wonderful places!

Today we will go to Church and then Greg and Ameri have invited us for dinner tonight. They have been so good and accommodating. Tomorrow Mike, Tim, and Jenn will fly home but not before they see two more museums close to the airport. There is just so much to see and do! I've enjoyed getting acquainted with Jenn. She is fun-loving and pleasant to have around. Nothing is official but they have certainly had a lot of fun together.

I wanted to relate an experience I had last Sunday. It started several weeks ago when we invited a lady, Patsy, to attend a night Relief Society meeting. Following the meeting we invited her to attend an Alex Boye concert at the Visitor's Center. She agreed. This concert was going to be a big one and so Sister Wege was asked to give out the tickets. The policy at the Visitor's Center was to give out tickets (550) at 5:30 and when the tickets were gone, different tickets were given out for the other smaller rooms in the Visitor's Center where they pipe the program in on closed circuit TV.

When they are expecting a big crowd Sister Wege usually gives out the tickets and so I am at the Visitor's Center with her from about 5:00 on. Usually we will take a recent convert or inactive with us and we will watch one of the movies in a small theatre to pass the time until the concert begins.

Last Sunday we watched the new Joseph Smith movie and the Spirit was so strong. After the movie was over, other people filed out of the room but Patsy and I stayed seated and started to visit. I knew that she had received her temple recommend several months ago and so I asked her if she was enjoying attending the temple. She said that although she did have a recommend, she had not been back since the first time she had gone through years ago. She is now in her 60's and I couldn't imagine why she hadn't been back.

She told me that when she went through the first time, she didn't have any support and so it was a rather traumatic experience. Then to top that off, when she was through with the session, she couldn't find her shoes. This was back in the day that you took off your shoes right as you came into the temple. She had placed them on a shoe rack and later went back to get them and they were gone.

She asked the help of the ordinance workers and so began a long hunt for her shoes. It was the middle of winter and she couldn't leave without them. Finally, after the temple had been searched high and low the workers determined that they were gone and offered Patsy a pair of white temple slippers to wear home. They didn't realize that all Patsy had was one pair of shoes to her name and now she had none.

Upon arriving home in her temple slippers, she called the bishop to ask for money to buy some shoes and he gave it to her and she bought them. That experience so upset her that in all the intervening years she had never returned to the temple.

As Patsy and I sat in the empty room alone I really felt prompted by the Spirit to tell her that it was time to put that behind her and get back to the temple so that she could be enlightened and strengthened. I told her that we would help her get her own temple clothes so that she didn't have to worry about rentals and that we would take her and stay at her side so that she knew what to do and when to do it. It was a very sweet exchange and so rewarding.

I was grateful that I had that opportunity in that private setting to get to the bottom of her reluctance and to help her find a way to get to the temple. For days after the experience, I just felt so overcome with gratitude for the opportunity I am having of working with these sisters.

(Sunday night) Well, it's been a wonderful day. Mike, Tim and Jenn arrived this morning at 8:30 and we attended meetings in the College Park Ward. I was able to introduce them to many of the women that I work with and it was such a treat. I loved having the ward meet them and people were kind and good to them.

We then ate at Greg and Ameri's home and that was a treat, too. Greg fixed spaghetti and meatballs, soup and salads, and wonderful garlic bread. The full time Elders also joined us so it was quite a feat to feed that big bunch. The

Elders presented a wonderful spiritual thought and the children were respectful and listened carefully during the presentation. Then we had a piano recital and the three oldest played their songs for us. It was another sweet touch of home for me and then Tim and Jenn drove me back to my apartment and we said our good-byes. They will fly out tomorrow after spending the morning touring but I will be back to my work with Sister Wege.

July 1, 2012

Last night a huge storm came through the area, with sheets of lightning and high winds. When the dust settled there were major power outages, fallen trees obstructing roadways, and cars and homes destroyed by the fallen trees.

I had just returned from helping a family pack for a move today and hadn't been home more than 15 minutes when the howl of the wind and the thunder and lightning started. I was so tired that I didn't stay up to watch it like some of the missionaries did but this morning the Visitor's Center was closed, the temple was closed, and several wards aren't sure they are going to be able to have meetings tomorrow because of the outages.

I went with another missionary couple to help with a move this morning. We hoped to be all through by early afternoon. The truck didn't arrive and finally we found out that there had been a mix-up and it wouldn't be arriving until this evening. So all the people from the ward who had gathered to help load a truck helped the family pack up and then carried all the stuff to the back patio. It was a horrendous job! I couldn't believe the amount of "stuff" this family had! And I couldn't believe that with three healthy teenagers and a mother-in-law that the family didn't have anything done towards getting things packed up! It almost seemed hopeless. We are going back over this evening and hoping that they can get the truck and get the help they need to do the job.

We've had a busy week. We are continuing our visiting in our three wards and trying to get a handle on names and situations. This next week we are going to take a break for the Fourth and maybe even go into the capital and join the festivities and fireworks there. With summer here it has been a little harder to track people down. They are here, there, and everywhere and the coming and going make it trickier to schedule appointments. We have about 10 sisters who are in rest homes or rehabilitation centers who are always home so we sometimes will schedule some of those into our day just to know that we will have at least one good contact for the day.

After spending the day packing and lifting boxes I hope I can get out of bed in the morning. Sister Wege twisted wrong this afternoon and hurt her back and she is hobbling around so we may be taking things a little slower this week.

It was interesting this morning. When we arrived at our building for ward council, we were informed that we were the only building in the stake with power and so all the full-time missionaries were told to visit our ward. We had so many members without power that our ward attendance was down, too. The air-conditioning in the chapel was out so we only held sacrament meeting and then dismissed for the day. We enjoyed hearing the testimonies of people's adventures with the storm.

One fellow who bore his testimony is the chief engineer for the temple and he told of going to the temple grounds and clearing away the debris so that patrons could get into the temple. The temple was closed except for those who had scheduled weddings for Saturday. The engineers used lanterns for the wedding parties and the sealing rooms since all the lights were out. It proved to be quite a task considering the huge crowds who were there for weddings. That will certainly be a fun memory for those who participated in the ceremonies! I guess they don't expect the temple to have power for several more days and so they are repeating that for the weddings scheduled for this coming Tuesday also.

Several of the ward members had near misses as far as fallen trees and roofs destroyed and cars crushed. One home across from the temple had the front of the house sheared off, exposing the upstairs rooms. The main road that runs past our apartment building had fallen trees and telephone poles obstructing it until the power company got crews out. Today there were still several intersections without traffic lights that had officers directing traffic, not an easy task with six lanes to account for.

Although ward members for the most part have water to drink and to flush their toilets, they have been put on rations so that there is water enough in case of fires. The biggest inconvenience for most of our members is the lack of air conditioning. Yesterday the temperatures were in the 90's and today it's supposed to reach over

100 so the air conditioning is a major concern, especially if you live in an apartment building. Elevators don't work so that is a huge imposition.

We have our refrigerator and freezer stuffed full of food and frozen goods from other missionaries in the area who are living without power. It's been nearly 48 hours. I guess the last time this happened it took five days to restore power so there were ward members who just took off and stayed with family and friends away from D.C. until power was restored. It's interesting to be a part of this. We invited other missionaries to come enjoy our cool apartment but so far everyone is toughing it out except for three people who came yesterday.

Life is good. Although you are in my thoughts, I don't worry too much about you because I know that the Lord is aware and you are sustained and strengthened in your daily challenges. I attend the temple each week and put several of your names on the temple prayer roll. It brings me a lot of comfort. I love the promises in the temple regarding our posterity and have seen those promises fulfilled many times.

July 8, 2012

We've been pushing hard this week to make up for the two days we took off earlier in the week. On the Fourth Sister Wege and I decided this may be the last time we'll be in the "District" for the holiday so we rode the Metro, went for the parade and then walked around the Mall (a large area between the monuments) and saw the displays.

Did I mention that the temperatures were in the high 90's! Sitting on the street curb in that 90-degree weather waiting for a parade that really wasn't as entertaining as the Eastern Idaho State Fair parade was misery and then we walked around the mall to a bunch of displays that weren't nearly as interesting as the Eastern Idaho State Fair displays and with food that can't compare to the (dare I say it?) the Eastern Idaho State Fair food.

By then it was only about three o'clock and we were in no mood to stick around until 9:30 for the fireworks so we headed back to the Metro and arrived home hot, tired, and grateful that we weren't one of the 2.5 million homes that were still without power from the previous weekend storm. But, because we had air conditioning and the Visitor's Center was still without power so all those missionaries were free of duties, we had a party! Then at 9:30 we went up to the 21st floor and watched the fireworks in four different locations from the patio. (And they weren't nearly as impressive as the show Frank Vandersloot puts on each Fourth over the Snake River in Idaho Falls)!

For the most part the power was back on soon thereafter and life resumed as usual except for the heat wave that has been gripping the East Coast. We've had 100+ weather with high humidity and it feels like it's raining but it's not; just so muggy and oppressive. Sister Wege is accustomed to Louisiana so the heat is to her liking but I'm already counting the days until fall arrives.

The missionary work moves forward although summer has its challenges. It's been hard to set appointments but on the other hand with the kids out of school we often find the kids home and that gives us an in. We've been in the area long enough that the sisters consider us their friends.

One interesting element of our missionary visits lately has been talking with the sisters about Family History. Many of our sisters are elderly and they tell us about their extended families and other childhood memories and so we encourage them to write their memories for their posterity.

We also encourage the sisters to prepare to go to the temple and then we suggest that they do some family history research so that they can take their own names. It is wonderful to see them get excited about that and it's fun to do it with them since most of them are first generation Mormons and none of their family names have been submitted, especially among the black sisters. There is so much interest in this that the library is open on Mondays just for black researchers and there are staff members, many who are not LDS, who are there to help these sisters.

I've decided that one of the most important things we can accomplish is to help sisters prepare to enter the temple. Many of them were baptized and then they didn't get nurtured enough that they went to the temple. Then they forget that that is their goal and they start thinking that the full blessings of the gospel aren't available to them.

We have been on a crusade in the College Park Ward to determine who hasn't been endowed and then to challenge them to correct the problems that are keeping them out of the temple. As you can imagine we have had some serious talks about Word of Wisdom, church attendance, and tithing. We're encouraging them to get their

patriarchal blessings. The gospel just adds so much richness to our lives.

July 15, 2012

Monday proved to be an exercise in patience. We scheduled a visit with a sister who is home bound because of back problems although she does get around albeit slowly. When we arrived at her home she was in a great deal of pain and said that she needed to call a taxi and check herself in at the emergency room at a nearby hospital. We offered to help and after gathering a few of her personal items we drove her to the hospital. That was at one in the afternoon and at six that evening I was still sitting in the waiting room and Sister Wege was still with Dorothy trying to get her checked in and settled. It was a long day. When we finally were on our way home, we both were exhausted and frustrated with the American medical system and could appreciate why it needs an overhaul! (even though we don't support ObamaCare!)

I can't believe the number of chronic diseases, cases of poor dental health, obesity, and a plethora of all kinds of mental illness that beset so much of the population here. I don't know if because we work with many of the poor, we see an inordinate number of problems but so many people, young and old, are dealing with serious health issues that they will be dealing with for the rest of their lives. Sitting in the waiting room and watching the tide of humanity coming and going I realized how grateful we should be for our good health!

Tuesday we missed district meeting because a ward member was having surgery and needed a ride to the clinic and then home following the procedure. Again, we were in the waiting room for several hours and were grateful to finally return the sister home and continue with our visiting.

Wednesday we took a sister to the Family History Center while we filled our shift there and then visited for the rest of the day. Thursday was more of the same.

Friday we took a nonmember sister to the Family History Center for the morning. She is a lady we met at a funeral and we started up a conversation and it led to us inviting her to utilize the Center. It was a productive morning and she was thrilled when we located four generations of her family on census records and were able to begin making a family tree for her and her children.

Today we tried to get in more visiting since next week and the week following that are going to be rather limited with so many other events coming in on us.

I may have mentioned before that the mission office couple, the Dougals, invited us to go with them to the Hill Cumorah Pageant next week. We will leave at six Thursday morning and attend the Palmyra Temple that afternoon and the Pageant that night. Friday we will do some touring in the morning and then head home. It is about an 8-hour trip so it's going to be a lot of driving. When Daddy and I toured with my siblings the fall of '08 we visited Palmyra and the Hill Cumorah but we never did get to see the pageant so I'm excited.

Melanie sent word from home that Jim Eldredge passed away this week. Although his children know that it is for the best, Rosemary will have a tough time since she lost her mother about 2 years ago, her husband about two months ago, and now her dad. She has quite a struggle. I haven't really heard any other news from home. Melanie said that the house and yard are looking good.

Sometimes when the days get long and the contacts don't want to talk to us, I have to remember SaraKay and how much harder the young missionaries work than we do. We can always pull away for a few hours and then do something fun for p-day but they have a pretty rigorous schedule.

My health is good. The family seems to be getting along okay. I'll have to admit that I don't trust you kids……don't trust you to tell me if you did have a problem. Once when I was visiting with Mike I overheard Marci telling him, "Don't you tell your mother anything that will worry her!" I know that all of you are trying to spare me but please, if you need to talk something through, call me and let me help carry the load. I love each of you so much. I miss you, too, but I'm so grateful that I'm able to be giving this service. It's so satisfying to feel the growth in these sweet sisters and to know that our fellowshipping is helping them to come to Christ. The Church is amazing and the gospel is true! Aren't we fortunate to have it in our lives!

July 22, 2012

We've had a productive and fun week. We went with the mission office couple, the Dougals, to the Camorah Pageant in Palmyra on Thursday night.

The Dougals are from Portland and have 10 children and their family is at the same stage as

mine so we had this immediate bond since I arrived in January. The camaraderie that the missionaries have in this mission is so satisfying. The temple and the Visitor Center are an integral part of our efforts with the less actives and new converts and so we see each other whenever we go to the various events. This is a great blessing to all of us. Sometimes when Sister Wege and I are tired of each other we can go to an event at the V.C. and we're refreshed and ready to get back into our daily routine.

With Becky and four coming tomorrow and Sister Wege's two sisters and husbands coming in Thursday this next week isn't going to be too productive. President Matsumori is good to let us take some P-days when we need them and so I don't feel too guilty since we haven't had a P-day for the last two weeks.

Palmyra was beautiful and green. We left at 6:00 a.m. and had a scenic drive through Maryland, Pennsylvania, and then New York State. This country is so beautiful! The wooded countryside with farm houses nestled in the trees and the rolling hills are so lush and green that it was like a continuous canopy.

Palmyra and the Church History sites were all groomed to perfection and there were 800 volunteers who have been in the area for two weeks practicing for the pageant. To man the Church history sites other volunteer couples were recruited so that they could accommodate the additional crowds of people who were coming for the pageant. The Visitor Center was full of guests and various displays and videos were used to remind us that the pageant is celebrating its 75th year! The costuming was amazing! The lighting, the special effects, the music; it was just spectacular! There are 4000 chairs set up on the lawn at the base of the hill where the pageant is performed and the local Lions and Rotary clubs sell concessions so people can get there early for their seats and mix and mingle with others who have come to see the event.

It was fun to see 12 other Washington D.C. North missionary couples there. We also visited with perfect strangers and made some connections with them. One sweet lady that I asked to take a picture of us eventually figured out that her mother and I were friends in high school. Her aunt Vera Christensen was one of the people that Daddy worked with to get her and her husband Barry to the temple during the time that Daddy was bishop of the Moreland Second Ward.

I also saw Wade Cox who is a missionary from Moreland Third Ward who is serving in the Ithaca Mission. It was so sweet to be a part of this huge group of people and to enjoy the beautiful summer evening. My sister, Kathy, told me to say hello to the Visitor Center Director, Richard Searle, who was a classmate of hers in high school but when I inquired at the V.C. I was told that the General YM president, Brother Beck, was in town and that Elder Searle was entertaining him for the evening.

After a late night on Thursday, we took Friday morning and toured the Sacred Grove, the Joseph Smith farm, the log house where the Angel Moroni appeared to him, the Martin Harris farm, and the Peter Whitmer home where the Church was organized.

One of the last couples we visited with at the Peter Whitmer farm was a couple from Blackfoot who knew Daddy and had even attended his funeral. A couple at the Grandin Press attended college with Daddy and me at Ricks. They were parents of "Dan, the Man" (Steve and David will remember Dan Fuller) and DaNae Fuller's daughter was also a volunteer just for the weeks of the pageant and said that she would update Rodney regarding where Steve and David were living and what they were up to. It is so wonderful to see old friends and see that they have stayed true.

July 29, 2012

We're leaving in a few minutes for a day of sailing on Chesapeake Bay and touring southern Maryland. There are several wealthy LDS families in southern Maryland who host the senior missionaries for a day of boating and fun.

(Saturday night) The sailing was everything I expected and more! What a treat! The Tate's, the family who hosted, have a home and private dock right on the Patuxent River that flows to the Atlantic Ocean and is across the peninsula from Chesapeake Bay. Brother Tate served as mission president in Alabama about three years ago. They have a home with the grounds groomed by a gardener, a beautiful catamaran, several large shops, a swimming pool, and all kinds of things to entertain big groups. They were good to us!

They have two LDS neighbors who also have sailboats and who helped out. There were about 40 in our group and we sailed three different boats several miles to Solomon's Island near

where the river flows into the Atlantic Ocean. The scenery was breathtaking!

As an added bonus, Elder Kukuchi (emeritus member of the Quorum of Seventies) just happened to be in the area and he joined us and spoke to us after the sailing and the dinner were over. He is known for his missionary zeal and really bore a strong testimony of the gospel. I didn't realize that he was there until almost time for the fireside so I didn't have a chance to connect with him in regards to Daddy's experiences with him.

Years ago when Daddy was in the mission presidency he attended a stake conference in Salmon, Idaho and Elder Kukuchi was the visiting authority. It was right after an earthquake hit the area and Daddy said that in the afternoon leadership meeting the walls of the chapel seemed to be slowly undulating but that Elder Kukuchi just kept right on teaching and it didn't alarm him or slow him down.

Elder Kikuchi needed to catch a flight out of Idaho Falls and so the Salmon Stake presidency asked Daddy if he could drop him off at the airport en route to Blackfoot after the stake conference so Dad had him all to himself for nearly four hours. He felt so privileged to have that opportunity and has always admired him.

Every time we missionaries are addressed by General Authorities, they make such a fuss over us and our sacrifices to be out here. I don't feel like my sacrifices are much compared to some of the couples that I know who really do have pressing situations at home.

This whole week has been mostly fun and very little work. Sunday night Becky, Maddie, Tate, and Larsen arrived from Philadelphia where they had been visiting Chet. J.Cole and Jeff were still in Shanghai where a technicality with Cole's passport prevented him from flying with his siblings. Becky helped get Rebecca, Emma, Seth, and Alia to California to spend the week with grandparents there and then flew on to Philly and then rented a car and drove to here on Sunday. Monday we took the Metro and toured the monuments and went to the Museum of Natural History. We then walked to the Capital where we hoped to hear a concert of the Navy band but when we discovered that it was a Jazz Band we decided to head for home. We had about walked our legs off and in the heat of the day! We were exhausted.

Monday night we received word that Cole's passport was ready and so Becky made plans to take the Amtrak to New Jersey to meet him at the airport. He flew from China on his own! He said that during his time in Shanghai and on the trip over he watched a total of 21 movies.

Becky caught the Metro to Union Station and caught Amtrak from there and then arrived at the airport and took another shuttle to the airline terminal and finally found Cole and headed back. They arrived here at about midnight. In the meantime, the other kids and I went swimming, hiked along Sligo Creek, and played Quirkle until bedtime.

Wednesday we did laundry, packed the car, visited the temple and Visitor's Center where they watched the new Joseph Smith movie and got to meet some of the missionaries who serve there. By noon we said our goodbyes and they were on their way back to Philadelphia for some time with Chet. Becky continued on to Utah and then all of them were going to some Olsen family events and then on to California for other family events and then home to Shanghai. What a circus with eight munchkins in tow!

On Thursday Sister Wege's sister, Marianne, arrived as well as some friends from Delaware. On Friday a ward member who we have become acquainted with took us on a tour of the Pentagon as well as the monument of 9/11. After that we toured the American Museum of Art and then rode the Metro home. In the midst of all this I have been trying to set up appointments for next week, keep touch with some less actives we are working with, get to the temple, put in our shift at the family history library.

August 5, 2012

Today was so exhilarating that I want to share the experience. After the first couple of Sundays in the College Park Ward when I first arrived in January, I asked Sister Wege if it was always just the whites who participated. I had noticed that especially in Relief Society all the responses were by the white members. She hadn't noticed that but took note and after a couple more weeks she agreed. It made me sad to think that several of these women had been members for a long time but somehow they weren't feeling comfortable enough with their relationships or scholarship to make a comment.

Today in testimony meeting we saw some of the fruits of our labors. The first person to bear her testimony was Wanda Thomas. Last Friday we took her to the temple to do the work for a favorite aunt. As we sat waiting for the baptismal session to begin, she mentioned to us that she felt her aunt at her side since she had arisen that morning. Wanda said that she knew that Mary was pleased that her temple work was getting done and that she was there with her anxiously awaiting it. When Wanda did the proxy confirmation ordinance there was such a beautiful spirit in the room and then we went to the initiatory area and she completed the initiatory.

By the time we completed the endowment session we had been in the temple four hours but we were so grateful for the opportunity. As Wanda entered the celestial room she said, "I just had a revelation. I have been praying for years that someone else in my family would join the Church. Now Auntie Mary has!"

Her testimony was beautiful and then another black sister arose and talked about the Nepalese children that she has been bringing to Church with her and about how grateful she is to help them come to a place where they could feel the spirit. And then Tigi who has been struggling with a stroke but whose brother is going to donate his kidney so she can have a transplant got up and made her way to the front of the chapel and bore witness of the Lord's goodness to her. And then another black sister, Kelly El Amin, bore witness of her struggles with motherhood but of how the Lord has strengthened her. It was such an amazing thing to see sister after sister bear witness of the Lord's goodness in their lives especially because I was sitting with three black sisters, one who is just investigating the Church and I knew that seeing their sisters bearing witness was touching them deeply.

Later in Relief Society we had one of the investigators bear her testimony and say that she had gone to a lot of different churches but she had seen and felt things today in our meetings that she felt were truly substantive and that she could use to better her life. The room was full of sisters, all of us rejoicing together, and feeling such a wonderful outpouring of the Spirit. We have three black sisters who are setting temple dates for August and who we are helping to do the research so they can begin doing their own family names. It is wonderful that with them being the first in their families to join the church they have many ancestors who are ready and waiting for their work to be done.

I may have mentioned that one of these sisters confided in us that she had been sexually abused by her father and that it had created a huge rift in her extended family. She made the decision to put aside her anger and to move ahead with preparing her parent's names for temple work. Since making that decision she has felt a forgiving spirit come over her and she has found healing from wounds that have haunted her for decades.

Last night I called the stake patriarch to ask about some of these sisters preparing to receive their blessings and he talked with me for over an hour about his feelings about some of the people in the ward. He was born and raised here in this area and has been a part of this work for many years. As he went from one person to another and mentioned what he thought should be happening with them, it was a thrill for me to be able to tell him that everyone he mentioned we have visited in these last few weeks. It was so confirming for us to know that the Lord is directing us in this work in gathering in these women who have been on the fringes and others who are newly baptized but haven't caught the vision of what the Lord wants for them.

It really was satisfying to be able to let Patriarch Keller know that those he mentioned are truly being prepared to enter the temple and move to a new plateau in their membership.

It was also a wonderful day for the full-time Elders in our ward. They have been working with several investigators but having a difficult time getting them out to Church and they can't be baptized unless they have attend their meetings on Sunday. This becomes a huge challenge for those who work on Sunday but today almost every investigator in their teaching pool showed up and stayed for the block of meetings.

The full-time young Elders and Sisters also spend part of their time working with less actives and this week they visited a sister who hasn't been to Church for over 30 years. She came today and bore her testimony and said that she has over the years been testing different churches and just didn't find much of any reason to change from the LDS religion but because of problems she had quit coming. This past week she had a dream and in it she was sitting in the chapel and she knew that she was supposed to come back to church so when the Elders knocked on her door, she didn't

hide like she had for so many years but she let them in and committed to come today.

The ward members who have known her for many years were all giving her hugs and sitting by her and making her feel welcome and it was wonderful to see. Another sister who has really struggled for a long time showed up after we took her to Hogie Yogie the other day. She stayed in the Primary with her son who has a learning disability but she made sure that we saw her there since she had made that promise to us over frozen yogurt!

Well, I could go on and on about what a wonderful day it was in the College Park Ward of the Silver Spring North Stake in Maryland, USA, but you get the idea that the Lord is aware of his children and will do His part to help these dear people grow in the gospel and receive the promised blessings. And what a joy and privilege to be a part of it! It is a wonderful thing to get up each morning and approach the Lord in prayer and ask him to guide my footsteps and consecrate my efforts that day.

It is a wonderful opportunity for me to be able to give my full time and attention to His work and to have my other responsibilities put aside for this season of dedication. I appreciate that you children are doing all you can to give me the freedom from concerns at home so I can dedicate these 18 months to the work.

Let me close with brief updates on the family.

Bennions of Hyde Park: Sam got an extension on his mission release date and will be returning in November and then starting at BYU in January. How I'll miss his creative missionary letters!

Katie and Josh will be at BYU together this fall. Steph completed her Master's Degree in July and is grateful to have that milestone completed. Lindsay needs to get his Master Gardener's degree; he has an amazing little farm that draws the admiration and envy of many neighbors!

The Andersons of Iowa: As YW president Shauntel spent the summer on the run! From youth conferences to camps to all kinds of other involvements (which include Camille.) She and Randy continue to find good reasons to stay in Iowa and the kids agree. Although Randy is not 100% pleased with his employment situation, he feels that it's workable and they are putting down some roots. This summer Archie is old enough to visit the nearby swimming pool unaccompanied by a parent and both Drake and Kinzie are becoming more independent. Need I say more!!!

Steve and Bonnie are ward mission leaders and have shared several stories with me about the success they are having. Who could resist them! Rachel is working at scout camp putting together a nest egg for BYU-I in January. Nate chose to work at odd jobs and bring in the bigger bucks this summer, and Chrissie, Jarod, and Anne Marie are running hither and yon to sports and music summer activities that will soon be over with the new school year.

David and Andrea have loved having Laurel home for a few months but will soon send her off to BYU again and register Anna as a senior! Joseph has had his own amazing summer with mowing jobs and winning first place at scout camp in the Iron Man race! He was one of two scouts to pass off the mile swim! Chantelle is coming into her own in music as well as sports and Nathan will be joining McKay in school this fall. It will be the first time in many years that Andrea will be home with only one child to keep her company.

Becky and Jeff will be flying home to Shanghai tomorrow with all eight in tow! I used to feel funny going places with so many kids but I'm sure they have had their share of interested stares as they take eight kids and luggage to the airport!

I was touched by how heart-broken the three kids were when they were here and Cole was still working out visa problems with Jeff in China. When Becky returned from New Jersey with Cole late at night, Tate roused from sleep and leaned over and gave Cole a big hug as he climbed onto the air mattress beside him!

I haven't heard from John since he flew out to the states but I know they had a rigorous schedule while they were here. One thing I know they did was have Emma attend an EFY with Camille while she was visiting in Ohio (I saw the pictures on Facebook) Yes, occasionally I find time to lurk on Facebook and catch up on my grandkids' activities and pictures! I suspect that their family is heading back this week because school bells are ringing in China as well as here! Tate told me that he and James have big plans for being at the same school this year!

Mike and Marci called on route home the other day from Boise and I could hear all the noise in the background. Occasionally we had to stop talking when the roar became too great or we got to laughing too hard about life with four preschoolers. Wait, Amber will be in first grade this year so it's now three preschoolers. Little Tanner is almost walking and Olivia is potty

trained! Give a cheer. All of us know how glorious that is! Of course, Marci has spent more than her share of time this summer "holding down the fort" while Mike attends the camps and other summer events as Bishop.

Paul and Jenny continue their summer marathon with trips, camping, ward activities, and the usual hosting that they do for friends, neighbors, and family.

Jenny's pregnancy is going well and Beth, Ben, and Sophie are looking forward to another year of school. Paul recently returned from a 50 miler with his teacher's quorum and talked to me about some of the concerns he has for the various members of his group. I was touched by his insights into the boys and by his sincere desire to help some of them rise above "the traditions of their fathers" when their home conditions are less than ideal.

Tim is hard at work and play. His work is satisfying. He has responsibility for other employees and often talks to me about the challenge of building people in the workplace and giving them opportunity to stretch and grow, even when correction and criticism need to be used. His tennis game continues to improve. A couple of weeks ago Mike and Marci spent the weekend with him and commented that it had been a great time. Then last week when I called him, he couldn't talk long because he was heading to Dave and Andrea's for the evening.

I'm so glad you kids have each other to lean on. I know Becky and John rely on that sibling connection and I know the Cache Valley bunch often take time out for time together. This summer even Paul and Jenny have had some time with siblings on her side of the family and I was so happy that Laurel and Shauntel got together when Emma and Camille went to EFY.

SaraKay has a new companion and a new set of challenges in a new area. Working as closely here as I do with the young Sisters, I can't help but wonder about SaraKay and how she is getting along with the myriad challenges that are a part of missionary life. I have enjoyed her last letters about some of the people she is working with. I can see that it gives them an infusion of enthusiasm to be moving around and being companions with different missionaries.

I learned the other day that when President Matsumori was asked to take two Relief Society sisters as full-time senior missionaries, he requested that there be four of us so that if things got bad and we couldn't get along, he could switch companionships. I'm glad we have been able to make this work. I noticed some new pictures on SaraKay's facebook that Stephani has posted. I appreciate Steph doing that for both of us so that our friends back home can keep in touch.

I'm going to sign off and go stand at the window and watch it rain. I love the way it rains here! It will cloud up and then it really dumps and everything is wet and green. Usually I'm in the car when it rains but today I can stand here and watch it and wish that some of this moisture would fall in Idaho. Everyone in our ward who has visited Idaho this summer comes back and tells me that Idaho is on fire. Things are tinder dry right now. Hopefully the grain is off and fields of ripened wheat aren't adding to the devastation.

August 12, 2012

We just got home from a day of sight-seeing at Chesapeake Bay. The other set of senior sisters (singles) who work in this mission invited our district leaders (Brother and Sister Noel) and us to come to their area and they would take us around and show us the sights.

We were able to get some things done here this morning before we left. We drove to southern Maryland together and went to Solomon's Island, a small island at the tip of Maryland that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean and the Patuxent River. Then we went to the Chesapeake Bay Beach and watched the sailboats, cruise ships, and even a distance ocean freighter off the shore.

We ate at a restaurant that has crab cakes as their specialty and I was glad I was adventurous and tried one. It was delicious! We walked along the boardwalk and enjoyed being one of the thousands of tourists who frequent the area. This is the same place that we went sailing a couple of weeks ago and it is just so picturesque and beautiful. I guess this area has been hammered in years past with some of the hurricanes that have come through but they just rebuild and continue to enjoy the area.

After our time at the beach, we visited an Amish market and bought some fresh fruit and vegetables and some homemade whole wheat bread. The Amish are a huge part of the economy of southern Maryland and their horses and carriages have first priority on all the roads. They have beautiful homes and gardens and they run roadside markets, small shops out of their homes

featuring quilts, and all kinds of quilted items, aprons, and knickknacks. They are an industrious people and the tourists really flock to their markets.

We visited the Amish in Pennsylvania several months ago and so it wasn't quite as much of a novelty this time but I guess they have a huge market in a nearby town here that we are going to go see before our mission is over.

Before our excursion was over, we got rained on; it came down in buckets. At times we almost had to pull over to the side of the road and wait it out since the windshield wipers couldn't handle the volume of water. I can see why this area is so lush and green.

We've had a great week of visiting and have a big day ahead tomorrow. This area has several facilities for all four branches of the armed services and a lot of soldiers are stationed here for one to two years before moving on. These soldiers and their families are often either in law or medicine receiving advanced training and so they are sharp people.

There is an abundance of graduate students who also are only here for 1-4 years and then they move on. This constant movement of members into and out of the wards has its advantages and disadvantages. Last week we were scheduled to visit College Park and when we got there, I hardly knew the ward! Over the last month they've had about 10 new families move in! We spent some time this week visiting these new families and getting acquainted. They are impressive and stable and it is so nice to add them to our struggling ward family. The regulars in this area really carry a huge load as far as adjusting to all the new ward members as well as the converts and investigators. It's a little unnerving to me but I guess a person gets used to it. We had such an exodus at the end of May that I thought we'd never recover but I think we added more than we lost so now we just need to get acquainted.

In one of SaraKay's letters she mentioned that her mission president said that the "mysteries of the kingdom" include knowing just what to say and do that will touch the investigators heart and influence them to desire baptism. I've thought a lot about that recently because we have several people that we are working with who just don't seem to be progressing. One woman in particular always has her own agenda when we visit. Even when it is obvious that we have come prepared to teach her the gospel, she manages to pull us off task and we leave wondering if we taught her anything at all. She is a member but is from Nigeria and is anxious to return to Nigeria so she stockpiles things and then ships them to Nigeria to be placed in a home she has purchased there, awaiting her return.

She has one foot in the Church and one foot in Babylon. She doesn't understand or value the gospel. She is a huge influence on her 17-year-old son who I think would willingly follow the gospel plan but she is influencing him and pulling him off, too. I keep praying that I will know the "mysteries of the kingdom" in regards to Bella but so far, no inspiration.

Another sister who we have nurtured is going to the temple this next Saturday for her own endowments. She is the lady who doesn't quite seem to be all there but she got her recommend so we're planning the big day.

Today on our trip, the Noels' told us of a lady in their ward who has similar problems but she is a faithful patron at the temple. I guess one of the first times she went to the temple she got lost and spent the night in the temple unbeknownst to anyone, including security. When they found her the next morning, she went merrily on her way so now when she comes the front desk takes her recommend and before they lock up for the night they check to see if she has come through and picked it up.

We had some excitement here on Thursday evening. We were just getting home from our day and had pulled into the parking garage when we heard the fire alarm go off. Immediately there were sirens and all kinds of emergency vehicles pulling into our apartment complex and by the time we got out of our car and gathered our belongings and made our way to the front of the apartment building, there were three fire trucks pulling in and people were pouring out of the building. Ladders were extended from the trucks and firemen were making their way into the building all dressed in their huge fire-fighting attire. We stood and watched as all the equipment was being unloaded. More and more residents were standing on the driveways and sidewalks watching with interest.

About a half hour later the firemen gave the okay for everyone to return to their apartments. Someone on the 10th floor had something overflow in the oven and burn and the smoke triggered the alarm. In a situation like this the elevators were jammed and not usable and so

we trudged 10 floors to our apartment and were grateful that we didn't live on the 21st floor like the other LDS missionaries in the building.

The weeks are flying by. We are planning for August, September, and October only because November 1st we move our missionary duties to the Visitor's Center in preparation for the Festival of Lights that begins the end of November and runs through January 2nd. We will have assignments in preparation for the Festival and then be assigned to help with greeting the 90,000+ people who come through in the month of December. It is a huge undertaking and for those two months we put our visiting aside. I'm excited about it since everyone tells me that it is the highlight of their time here.

August 19, 2012

(Friday) We've had an incredible week! We went with the temple missionaries sailing on Monday. The Tates, who sponsor the event every summer, do it in two sessions. We were invited back since there was only one "black badge" couple going on the second session and they asked if we would like to tag along to keep them company. We did and it was as wonderful the second time as the first. The beauty of the area and the amazing boats and homes that line the shores of the Patuxent River are so picturesque. I think if I get to heaven, I will request a summer home near Chesapeake Bay!

Tuesday we started into our week and visiting. We decided that in addition to the new sisters who we are visiting in our new two wards, that we would go back and revisit others who we felt were open to our visit and who might respond to our invitation to come back. Each day we had a list of about 10 sisters and at day's end we had been to each door, left a card saying that we had dropped by or had a visit with them if they were home. We had some wonderful visits and some of the hard core less actives we were able to at least make a contact and have a few words at the door.

Yesterday we got in to see a woman who continued to elude us. Usually her husband answered the door and after visiting on the step with him we had a suspicion that the family was inactive because of the father. He wasn't going to give them permission to attend Church since he had fallen out of activity due to a rift with the Bishop. We finally got to her and it was so sweet to hear her tearfully tell how much she would like to return, how much she misses the ward, and how much her daughter needs YW. That one visit was so critical and now we can move ahead with prayers and plans and do what we can to help her.

Today we again tried to visit some of the less actives who haven't been to Church for years. I felt we needed one more chance to get a dialogue going. These women have husbands who are rude to us or close the door on us when they see our name tags.

Last weekend I baked poppy seed bread and last night I fixed six trays of goodies and we went with the treat in hand. At each home we at least got a short audience with the husband or wife. The man who closed the door on us several months ago came to the door, smiled as he took the bread, asked us who we were, and then realized that we were the missionaries. He kept the bread but closed the door (slower than last time.) Next time I will take something else to entice him! I think his wife has cancer and he is trying to care for her. He looks so bedraggled and tired and I imagine that they both could use a friend.

At the next house no one was home but I left the bread and a note. Several hours later I got a phone call from the sister saying that if we would call and come by again, she would be happy to visit with us. Yes!

At the next house the woman was outside working with a tiny infant strapped to her back. We visited with her and she promised that she would call us and set up an appointment. The family is immigrants from Africa and they have been living with a Muslim family. They don't have a lot of freedom in their present situation. Zainab showed us her baby and we were able to make a fuss over him. Before we left, she said that we could return and that she would find a way for us to visit. I was so happy I almost cried. (I'm not saying the poppy seed bread was the reason but I think it helped.)

Another family that we visited several times and just couldn't get in the door is the Measday family. The mother is loud and strongly opinionated about everything and had a bad experience soon after she joined the Church and hasn't been back. Her youngest son, Walter, who was baptized when his mother was, joined the Marines and will be leaving October 9th. We finally got in the door and as we visited with Mary, we watched Walter hanging around and I felt quite strongly that he was interested in the Church even though his mother was antagonistic. At first, she lit into us about worshiping Joseph Smith and we

let her rant and rave and then we kept talking and she settled down.

Last week we visited with both of them and she agreed that if Walter wanted to take the lessons, she was okay with it. When I called Walter later, he agreed that maybe it would be helpful for him to have the lessons and so we've got that lined up. I have contacted the bishop and he is getting a serviceman's packet ready for Walter and the full-time Elders are going to start teaching him Sunday.

It was interesting that after we let Mary vent, she eventually followed us out the door and down the street to our car and then said, "I wish someone would care enough about my other son to help him, too." She probably didn't think about what she had said but she was confirming to us that she realized our reason for being there was because we cared and wanted the best for Walter.

Tomorrow we take Darlene Seldon to the temple. She is so excited she's like a kid on Christmas morning. We have several others who should be following in the weeks ahead.

I received a sweet handwritten note from SaraKay last week and I thought that I would include part of it in this letter.

"But really I'm gaining so much confidence and people skills, teaching skills, deep rock-solid testimony. The mission is a miracle! It is without a doubt the most beautiful, satisfying, glorious time of my life! It's everything I ever imagined and more. It's transforming the way I think, interact, study, pray, teach, everything! I am absolutely intrigued by the things we learn about people's lives and pasts. The things they've overcome and suffered through. I would love to write a book with stories and their pictures...there are heroes to be found all around us! I haven't talked much about investigators lately in my emails because with my companion's physical therapy the work is very slow. But I'm looking forward to becoming senior companion and calling the shots. I have some "game plans" to put into practice."

I've appreciated the phone calls and emails from everyone, keeping me posted on your comings and goings. Since I wrote the updates two weeks ago Dave and family have been to the Redwood Forest, Paul and Jenny made a quick trip to Utah to attend the Johnson reunion in Park City, and Mike and Marci have been in Utah to a dental convention and to see Marci's brother who was visiting from D.C.

Rachel, Laurel, and Josh have finished their summer employment and Laurel and Josh are moving to Provo this week. Rachel has work lined up until January when she starts at BYU-I.

Katie graduated from BYU in May, Josh is being ordained an Elder Sunday, both China families are back safely to Shanghai, and John and Jeff both were put to work in the YM program of their branch. Becky and Laurel are excited for them to work with James and Tate in the Deacons quorum. School is just around the corner and BYU football is on the horizon. Someone told me that they are in the top 25 this year. And the Tabernacle Choir is performing at BYU-I in September. Oh, that is hard to miss! Love to everyone!

(Sunday) Another great day! Lots going on. Twelve new couples have joined our ward in the last three weeks and they are dynamite. It's going to be all we can do to engage them fully, they are so strong and capable. Our Relief Society teacher today wore a tall headdress and full-length African dress......She looked stunning! I just sit there surrounded by these beautiful black women (and a few beautiful Latino, Asian, and white women) and chuckle at how amazing my mission experiences are!

August 25, 2012

Each night when we arrive home from our day's visits and activities, I write up a summary of our visits so that we have a record of each visit to a particular sister. Today I wrote up an especially long report on two of our sisters and want to include those in this letter this week.

8/23: Had a very sweet thing happen today during our weekly visit with Barbara. Maybe a little background information about her might be helpful to really understand the significance of her story. Barbara's mother left the family when she was very young and she has a brother and sister but none of the family has stayed very close and so Barbara, who has neither a husband or children, has known a lot of loneliness. Each week when we go to teach her, we read the Book of Mormon with her and encourage her to pray and to trust in the Lord.

Today Barbara told us that on Monday she had had an exhausting day of traveling back and forth from the eye doctor where she had her eyes checked and then waiting for over an hour with

other residents of the care center for the bus to come back and get them. By the time she arrived home and had her dinner, she was exhausted and so she decided to go to bed early.

As she lay in bed, she began thinking about how the Lord must have helped her to survive her busy day because she knew she could not have done it without His help. Her thoughts then took her back over the years and she thought of some of the difficult times she had gone through and she realized for the first time that the only way she could have survived those experiences was with the Lord's help. And then she realized that for most of those years she really had not been aware that the Lord was working in her life and so she hadn't been grateful and expressed her gratitude to Him.

This led to feelings of remorse and so right there in bed she said a prayer and asked the Lord's forgiveness for all those times when He had been there for her but she had not been aware of it. And then a wonderful thing happened. She felt a comforting warmth envelop her as if He was encircling her with His loving arms and she knew not only that she had been forgiven but that the Lord knew her, he knew her struggles, and he was there with forgiveness and love. The experience was so powerful and she bore witness to us that she knows that the Lord lives and loves her!

What an amazing example of the Lord's watch care over every child! And of course, as missionaries we were thrilled because we have born witness time and time again of her value and worth, but now the Lord Himself has confirmed that to her in a very sweet and sacred experience.

8/23: Picked up Wanda and took her to the Family History Center to print out a name that Sharon Hulton had prepared for her. It was a younger sister of Wanda's who died in 2005 of sickle cell anemia. Wanda said that it was a very difficult experience on the whole family and especially on Wanda who was especially close..

After printing out the Temple Ready form we went to the temple where we had scheduled to do the baptism and confirmation. We discovered when we got there that the other scheduled group had been delayed so we were the only ones in the baptistery. Wanda didn't feel that she had the stamina to do the baptism so Sister Wege offered to do it for her. All of the ordinance workers were so accommodating and sweet to Wanda and before the ordinance was performed, one of the temple matrons came and spoke to us about the sacredness of these ordinances and of a story that missionaries told about one of their investigators. They were teaching a young woman about the gospel. This woman's father died when she was very young and she was being raised by a loving step-father. Her mother didn't want her to forget her biological father so she had placed a picture of her father on her nightstand. Through this picture she knew of her father but had never known him face to face.

Well, she grew up and met the missionaries and they began teaching her the gospel. After one of their lessons, they asked her if she had any questions for them. She said that she did but it wasn't about what they had been teaching her; it was about a dream that she had that she didn't understand. In her dream she saw a man dressed in white clothing and he was smiling at her and bidding her to come. She recognized that this man in white was her father. The missionaries told her that he was encouraging her to join the Church and to do the work for her deceased family members.

While Sister Pratt related this story the spirit was very strong and later, after Wanda completed the temple work for her sister, she told us a story about her conversion.

She said that she had always been searching for the true Church. As a young child she often would see the Washington D.C. LDS Temple over the tops of the trees and she had wanted to someday go into that building.

When she was a young adult she responded to an ad on TV about the Church and soon two young LDS Elders were at her door and they began teaching her the gospel. The lesson on the restoration was especially amazing and she asked the Elders how they could expect her to believe such a story. They told her that she could know for herself and counseled her to pray and ask the Lord if it was true.

After the Elders left, she was cleaning up the room and was on her knees picking up some things when she noticed a brochure on the coffee table that the Elders left. On the front of it was a picture of the Washington D.C. Temple! She recognized it as the building on the freeway that she had always been so enamored with. So right there and then she prayed that the Lord would let her know if what the missionaries told her was true.

That night she had a dream and in the dream it was as if she was a third party looking on as the Prophet Joseph had his First Vision. She knew then that the account was true and from that time on she never doubted the truthfulness of the gospel.

I am constantly amazed at the Lord's miracles in the lives of these sisters. Some of you will remember the letter I wrote about Darlene and her excitement for the Church and going to the temple. Every time I thought about it I felt a wave of relief that I wasn't the Bishop having to make that decision since I wasn't sure if Darlene had the mental capacity to grasp the sacredness of it.

Well, we took her through last week and then again last night. She had prepared some names of her mother, mother-in-law, uncles and aunts and we got cards printed for that as well as doing some initiatory before the session.

Of course, this was all new to Darlene and I was acting like a mother hen trying to help her understand what to wear for initiatory, and then what to wear for the session, and then to get to the right place at the right time.

I suggested after we finished initiatory that after she got dressed that she use the restroom before we went to the session. I thought that I had made it clear where she was to meet us but when we got to the new name area she was nowhere in sight. We checked the lockers, the initiatory area, the bathroom, and then I went out into the hall that leads to the stairs and, low and behold, I spotted Darlene sauntering down the hall on her way to "who knows where". I raced after her as quickly as one can race in the temple and got to her just before she disappeared into the stairwell. We laughed together as we made our way back to the new name area about her being lost in the temple. By then several of the temple workers were also looking and the name, "Darlene" was on everyone's lips.

The session was wonderful and when it came time for the prayer, Darlene jumped to her feet and made her way to the front. Luckily, we had one of the senior couples sitting behind us and we nudged Elder Dougall with a look and he stood at her side. She looked so beautiful in her white clothes and after we were out of the temple and enroute home she kept saying, "That is just a bit of heaven. That is the most peaceful place! That is so beautiful!" I have already seen Darlene moderate some of her behaviors and know that as the "temple goes through her" that she will continue to stabilize and find strength and understanding. I guess this whole experience has made a believer out of me!

We did have one disheartening thing happen in regards to our sweet Tigi. She is a 35-year-old black woman from Sierra Leone who has been a member for many years. She has been so faithful even though many of her family are Muslim and give her a bad time. About a year ago she had a stoke that left her partially paralyzed on her left side and for all of the time we have worked with her we have continued to encourage her to trust in the Lord and his will.

Of course, being so dependent has been a huge problem and she is living with her mother and brother in a place that is a mess. It could be nice if the family cleaned things up but even after the ward went out of their way to furnish it with nice things the family continues to live in a mess. As a result of the stroke, Tigi is on dialysis and rides the bus back and forth four times a week to a local dialysis center where she takes treatments. All of this has been hard on her body and she has needle marks up and down her arms and has almost died of staph infections in the portal that the dialysis is run through. Now it's been found that she may have a heart problem as well and so her opportunity for a kidney transplant has been lessened.

Last week when we visited, we arrived at our scheduled weekly visit and she and her mother arrived shortly thereafter. Tigi was dressed head to foot in Muslim garb including the head covering. She had been attending another Church. At the time Sister Wege and I didn't say much but when Tigi didn't come to Sunday services in College Park Ward we both worried about it. Yesterday we found out that she has been attending this other "brethren" Muslim church and we talked very straight with her about her testimony and the Lord's many tender mercies to her.

Right in the middle of our visit a fellow dressed in full Muslim garb came to visit Tigi. He was 40ish and we were grateful that we were there with Tigi since her mother and brother were gone. This fellow hung around and then went into Tigi's house (we were sitting on her porch.) We kept teaching and eventually he came out and asked if he could speak to Tigi in private. She went in and then came back out and he left. Tigi wouldn't say what he wanted but Sister Wege and I both felt uneasy about the whole situation.

Before we left Tigi vented about all of her frustration with the Lord and how He had let her down. This was so unlike her that we probed a little and found out that she was trying to get a divorce but had trouble with the lawyer and her ex had already remarried and Tigi was mad about all of that, too.

Then upon further talking Tigi told us that the "brethren" in the other Church told her that her problems were due to the voodoo that her ex was using on her. She continued to say that she had sent her prayers up with water and still they hadn't been answered. When we asked about that she said that if you pour water in a cup and put the cup in front of you on the floor and pray over it, that after the prayer you pour the water on the floor by the door and your prayers will be especially powerful.

By this time Sister Wege and I were bearing down in pure testimony to Tigi about the Holy Ghost and Jesus Christ and trying to help her see that she was being led astray and duped by her family and her other Church's leaders. We eventually left but with heavy hearts. She promised us that she would be to Church Sunday but she wouldn't commit to not going to the Brethren Church on Friday. We know that the money that she receives for her disability from the government is substantial and since her mother and brother are not working, we are wondering if she is their golden goose.

Hopefully this other fellow isn't conniving because of those funds, also. I know I sound paranoid but after what I have seen, I have very little faith and trust in some individuals.

A few weeks ago President Matsumori visited our District meeting and counseled us in regards to Muslim investigators. He said that we were to proceed with caution especially if the family of the investigator has any tendencies toward violence. We are not to pursue teaching Muslims if they are not planning to live in the U.S. long term.

We had one situation where we felt nervous about a woman who was a political refugee and we were relieved when she moved to Baltimore and out of our area. Missionary work certainly has its ups and downs. I am trying to be as gentle as a lamb but wise as a fox.

September 1, 2012

Today we had some very spiritual visits. First, we have a sister who has almost gone inactive over the last three months. It's been one problem after another until we worried that she would just fade away. We decided that we would focus our efforts on her and get to the root of the real problem. Today we picked her up and took her to lunch and she opened up to us and we learned several very disturbing things that were going on with her family. We were able to counsel her to meet with our Bishop and to let the Church and its quorum and auxiliaries be a strength and support to her. She is truly carrying a heavy load and needs the resources of the Church to assist.

When our lunch date was over, we expressed our love and hope that she would take a stand for righteousness in her home by being active in the Church. I was so grateful that we kept persisting despite her excuses.

We then went to visit a mother (87) daughter duo (70). Before we got to their apartment Sister Wege said that if she didn't see any spiritual fruits of our visit that she wanted to take them off of our list of monthly visits. The daughter, Jeanetta, has had MS for many years and her mother and a CNA take care of her. Well, we were welcomed into their apartment and we all sat down in the living room with the TV soaps blaring and both Sister Wege and I thought that this certainly wasn't worth our time. Fortunately, that TV show ended and another started and Francis said that she didn't like the new show. We grabbed the remote and turned it off. Yeah!

From that point on the Spirit entered the apartment and we had the sweetest visit about the state of the soul after death and the role of adversity in our lives. We talked about David and Goliath (Francis reads the Bible to Jeanetta every day) and about how the Savior supports us in our trials. Of course, this black mother who has been the primary care giver of Jeanette for 70 years could teach us a thing or two about being supported in our trials.

Francis said that she had been reading in an old Relief Society manual and she went and got it and showed us a picture of her on her baptism day with the Elders who baptized her. This was such a surprise since when we first visited them several months ago, they told us that they had joined another Church and didn't attend the ward anymore. When it was time to go, we asked if Francis would like to pray and she hesitated but gave the most beautiful prayer including thanking the Lord for us and our serving them and taking our time to visit them.

Well, as we walked down the long hall and left the building after our visit, neither Sister Wege nor I said much. I think we were both humbled and knew that the Lord had given us a strong sign that we were supposed to be in that home each month and that those two dear sisters were precious daughters in His kingdom.

One of the last visits of the day was to a sister who has three sons. She and her sons, her husband, and her mother-in-law all live in a very small apartment. Things are usually helter-skelter to say the least and most of the time we stand and visit because there just isn't anywhere cleared away to sit. Since our first visit, Wanda has started coming to Church although her husband and mother-in-law take the three sons and go to their own Church. It's not ideal but okay for now.

Today Wanda invited us to sit down and we found a place and sat and visited while the two youngest sons played video games a few feet away and worked on homework. Wanda is quite husky and has an extremely loud voice and periodically she would yell, "Turn that TV down and get your homework done right now!" After these outbursts we could see Wanda was needed by her boys so we kept our visit short and Sister Wege started into a spiritual thought. Just then the older son (13) arrived home and we took a minute to talk football with him. After a short exchange with him Sister Wege turned to Alma 32 and I opened my Book of Mormon so Wanda and I, sitting close together, could follow along.

Sister Wege read a verse and then Wanda read and then as Sister Wege started to explain the verses Wanda let out a holler, "I'm going to tan your hide if you don't turn that down and get busy!" and then Wanda turned back to the scriptures and Sister Wege continued until Wanda yelled out again, " If you want to go to football practice, you'd better do what you're told!" and on and on. Finally, it was prayer time and with another holler the kids gathered, the TV was muted, and we bowed in prayer to petition the Lord to bless these three fine sons, their dedicated mother, and help them succeed in their school work.

As we left the house, we commented to each other that despite Wanda's interesting parenting style there was no question that the boys were loved and Wanda had her heart in the right place. When we got to the car I started to laugh about Sister Wege trying to give a spiritual thought and how each time Wanda hollered, it startled me so badly that I jumped right up off the couch. Sister Wege wasn't laughing but I laughed enough for both of us.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my mission is to have a consistent daily study time. It has become a much-anticipated time of my day! Another goal I've set for my mission is to stay awake during my prayers. Isn't that awful to admit! Never-the-less my prayers can stretch on and on and sometimes I find myself drifting and not focusing on what I'm saying. I'm not sure how the Lord can make sense of my rambling but I know He gets the message. I guess the reason I want to be more focused is just to show Him that I reverence and esteem Him and value my time with Him.

Another personal goal for my mission is to become more familiar with the scriptures and "liken" them to myself. I have had a couple of situations that have helped me feel more confident in my "feelings" and to exert myself more in my companionship. One of the more difficult things I've had to deal with is the feeling of inadequacy as a missionary. Sister Wege is on her second mission and she was the hub of her first mission because she was the secretary in the mission office and ran that office single-handedly for five months! She has a lot of experience with how a mission runs and so I usually defer to her opinions.

Each day in my personal prayers I would pray that I would feel the Spirit and be guided to say and do what the Savior would want. One day I was reading in the Doctrine and Covenants about Oliver Cowdery's frustration in not thinking he had gotten an answer to his inquiry regarding if the work he was doing for Joseph was truly of divine origin. The Lord told him that he had been receiving inspiration even though he didn't recognize it. That scripture got me thinking about some of the impressions I had been having regarding some of our women that we work with. I realized that I was being inspired by the Holy Ghost but I was not pursuing the impressions because of my feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Yesterday I had a dramatic example of this which helped me to know that the Lord is giving me promptings but I need to be bolder in my expressions of what I feel needs to happen.

We had our weekly visit with Tigi, the young woman who has had a stroke. She has been a member for many years but her family is all

Muslims but are okay with her being a Mormon. Last week when we visited her, we were sitting on the porch when a young man, dressed in Muslim clothes, dropped in for a visit. He chatted with us for a few minutes and then went on into the house. Tigi was home alone and she told him to wait a while. Soon he came out and asked if he could visit with her in private. She went in and soon came out and he left. In a while as we were preparing to go I probed a little about Tigi's friend but she didn't offer any explanation so I didn't press the issue.

Later as we returned home, I commented to Sister Wege that I felt uneasy about Tigi's friend. I said that I wasn't sure what I saw in Tigi's eyes but it wasn't disgust or fear and I thought it was attraction. She didn't respond so I dropped the issue but worried off and on all week about Tigi and how vulnerable she is right now with all her health issues and other problems.

Yesterday we went for our weekly visit and after visiting a while I said, "I've been thinking about you and the fellow who was here last week for a visit. Is he more than a friend?" Tigi responded without hesitation, "I love him and I want to marry him and I've told him so." She then proceeded to tell us that she was tired of not having a husband and that this man liked her and she was going to marry him if he would have her. She said that she had looked around in the Mormon Church and there wasn't any Mormon man who would marry her and so she wanted a Muslim man.

Well, my experiences with Muslim men goes way back when Grandma Ilene lived in Pakistan for two years and that experience along with some books I've read has given me strong feelings against traditional Muslim men. To put it simply, the men own their wives and have total control over them. Both Sister Wege and I tried to explain to Tigi what she would be taking on and how very difficult her life could be. But, she was not to be dissuaded from it despite our concerns. Of course, she would have to give up her Christian religion, too.

This information that Tigi shared with us helped us understand a lot of things that we have seen going on with her the last few weeks. She has been determined to get a divorce from her husband who she has been separated from for several years. Now we understand that she wants that because she wants to remarry. We also couldn't understand why she was attending the mosque and dressing in the head covering and other Muslim clothes. Now we know why. I think part of this fellow's fascination with Tigi is that she gets a pretty healthy monthly check due to her disability and I'm wondering if he is after that. Of course, I didn't say that to Tigi but it certainly crossed my mind.

Do I sound suspicious? I am. So many deadbeat men out here live off of their wives, never lifting a finger to provide any kind of support of her or the children. I don't understand why the women put up with it but they do.

Of course, this whole situation raises a lot of red flags for us. I guess first of all, we have to proceed with caution now because we don't want to be a target for our criticism of Islam. We need to determine what is safe and what is not. We need to follow President Matsumori's counsel and not get involved with any Muslim situation where the people have a tendency towards violence. We haven't felt that at all in Tigi's household but if she marries this fellow, our visits may be coming to an end.

I know this work is true. I know that Satan is real and he is working hard to frustrate the work. I'm so grateful for the many blessings that our extended family is experiencing and I acknowledge the Lord's tender mercies in our lives. Have a good week. Mom

September 9, 2012

We spent this morning in the temple and then went to lunch with our District leader and his wife. They are leaving on Tuesday to return home to Orem, Utah. He was the baseball coach for BYU for many years and then served as president of the North Carolina Mission and has served two other missions since then. Talk about devoted! They have been such a pleasure to work with. They are going to Boston on Monday to visit some of their kids and then will wend their way home next week. It's wonderful people like them that makes a mission so amazing!

Our week has been a little different. We would schedule our day and then have to put our schedule aside for more pressing matters. Now that the sisters in these three wards are coming to know us better, they call on us more and we end up with all kinds of interesting activities.

On Thursday I made several phone calls lining up appointments but before the night was over, several of the sisters had called with excuses of why they wouldn't be home. We figured that we would have a quiet morning at home and then go

to our afternoon appointments so having the cancellations wasn't too disturbing.

But, Friday morning one of our sisters called. She had a seizure on Thursday evening and couldn't remember how it happened or where it happened except that there was blood on the kitchen floor. She had a slight headache so her husband decided that Friday he would take her to the emergency room and wondered if we could pick her up when she was through at the ER. We agreed and were grateful that we didn't have to call and cancel appointments.

Well, what we thought might be a couple of hours turned into a five hour wait and I was canceling afternoon appointments and feeling badly about it. Our biggest concern was Tigi who we meet with every Friday and when I finally got through to her to apologize, she wasn't home for our appointment but would be there later so we went by after we delivered Linda home. So it all worked out. Of course, the other sisters who we canceled with were very understanding and we have rescheduled for next week.

On Tuesday afternoon we took a sister to the local public library to work on her family history. She doesn't own a car and so it becomes a problem that she can't get herself to the Family History Library without us taking her. We found out that the local library is right down the street from her home and has Ancestry.com so she could do a lot of her research right there close at hand. I have been meeting with her since she doesn't know the program yet so it's pretty time consuming. If I can get her independent it will be a blessing for her for years to come.

Wednesday was an all-mission sports day for the young missionaries so we substituted for the young sisters and spent the day at the Visitor's Center greeting guests and showing people around. It was a relaxing and fun day but it made me happy that I'm out in the field and not in a Visitor Center. We have such a variety of things we do that there is seldom a boring moment.

Next Tuesday I am leading a small choir of senior missionaries who have been asked to participate in the monthly "Night of Music and Inspiration" at the Visitor’s Center. The song that I was given to perform reminds me of an old Protestant hymn but the young sister in charge of the program was very set on what she wanted so we are trying to get it ready. Getting senior missionaries to perform has been like pulling teeth! But, we do have a group of about 16 of us so hopefully it will be okay. It's been fun to lead a choir again.

This week we met with an Ethiopian woman, Sara, who is married to Daniel. Daniel recently went through the temple and is so excited about his membership in the Church. He and Sara have three sons who are very bright, well groomed, and very active in the YM's program. It's Daniel's heart's desire that Sara join the Church but Sara isn't converted and is resisting. Last week we dropped in on Sara and we had a nice visit with her. Later Daniel told us that Sara liked us and that she has agreed to have the missionary lessons. We were overjoyed and made an appointment this week just to visit for a few minutes. The full-time Elders will do the teaching and have asked us to come with them on these appointments since they feel that we have connected with her. Sara feeds them one night a week plus works a full-time job and is taking an on-line college course every night for an hour and a half.

Well, when we went by, Sara welcomed us in but immediately she became rather forceful and almost belligerent about the Church and our claim to have a prophet. It wasn't that we claimed to have a prophet that bothered her, it was that we thought we were the only Church to have a prophet and she thought that we were rather presumptuous to make that claim. As we visited with her, we encouraged her to ask the questions that were troubling her. We were seeing her in a new light as far as some anger towards the Church.

All at once Daniel arrived home and she went to the door to open it for him and he came in and sat down and began to talk to us. She clammed right up and didn't say anything more.

Daniel proceeded to tell us that we didn't need to discuss religion with Sara because she was going to get baptized because they wanted to be a forever family and Sara loved him and he loved her and she was willing to do this for him and the boys. Sara sat sullen and hardly said another word. We could see that as long as her husband was there, Sara wasn't going to say any more so we soon left.

Later the full-time Elders called and asked how our visit had gone and they concurred that we have a problem with the cultural traditions in Ethiopia that dictate a women be subservient to her husband. The missionaries want Sara to join because she feels that it's true, not just to be

obedient to Daniel. So we're all praying for inspiration in how to help Daniel see that his forcing her to accept baptism isn't ideal and that he needs to give her the agency to investigate and find out for herself.

It made me sad for everyone in the family because I can see that Daniel has expectations and if the full-time missionaries say too much he may feel that they are overstepping his bounds as patriarch or that they are giving Sara more say in the decision than he feels like is proper.

Being on this mission has really helped me see some of the challenges of taking the gospel to the world. As long as other cultures have mistaken ideas of family and spousal relationships, the gospel doesn't fit and it causes conflict. People really do have to have a new mindset as they accept the gospel and the LDS way of life. It never ceases to amaze me that people can embrace the gospel and the Church despite all the challenges it brings.

September 15, 2012

This past week we have seen a lot of miracles. A few weeks ago we were talking through the number of women we have yet to visit before we get involved with helping at the Visitor's Center in November and December. Apparently, we will devote about eight hours a day to that once we start the first week of November with set-up and so we are feeling the crunch as far as getting around to these women. We decided that maybe we should ask the ward Relief Society presidents who they feel are the most in need and target those sisters. When we ask the Relief Society president in the Laurel Ward she named two sisters who had been on her mind a lot lately and we invited her to go with us and make the visits.

The first woman has been inactive for about 20 years but Sister Lougee knew her from way back. When we dropped in on Dianna, her surprise at seeing Sister Lougee was evident and the two of them started catching up on old times and the old ward, and who had moved, and who had died, and who and who and who........We weren't sure that we were ever going to get away but to see the bonding going on was wonderful! It was obvious that Dianna missed her association with the ward and that she had fond feelings still for the Church. It was magic all the way around and when we finally did break away, we all three gave a cheer for such a wonderful visit!

The next visit was with someone who moved into the ward about a year ago but has never come out or shown any interest. We called before we dropped in and found that the number was not in service but there was another number given so we called that one. No one answered so I left a message. Within a couple of minutes Judith returned my call and said that she had just walked in the door and would be so happy if we could visit her....right then....right now!

It took us by surprise but we rushed right over before she had a chance to change her mind. To make this story short that day at work Judith had been visiting with an old friend who asked her why she wasn't attending her ward and it got Judith thinking about the Church and then we called and it was like a tender mercy that there we were ready to invite her back and mentor her along with this important step in her life. She has had so many sad things happening to her lately and she has felt such a need to reconnect with the Church but just didn't feel like she could do it alone.

As we visited with Judith and then left her apartment, we reminded Sister Lougee that she had said to us that she had had these two women on her mind lately and that was certainly the Holy Ghost prompting her that they were willing and ready to come back!

Yesterday we visited a family (mother and son) who run a dog grooming business. We have been back several times over the months and pretty much focused on the mother, Carrie.

This time her son, Lincoln, was there and I was grateful because I had been doing some investigative work about him and what his history was. He is about 6'3" and thin as a rail; very introverted and even a little scary. I had previously called the single adult ward bishop and he filled me in on a little of his history including that Lincoln had dropped out of activity as a deacon and he and his mother had never been back.

So....when Lincoln was there I thought I would ask him some questions about his feelings about the Church since Carrie had told us that she won't come without him since there is just the two of them.

Lincoln told me that he has no interest in the Church, didn't know if he even believed in God, and that he wasn't feeling well and that he was on the verge of being mad at me. I could see that Carrie was feeling embarrassed by his bad

responses but I was okay and we continued talking about other things. Eventually he opened up about an incident he had when 18 when he was drinking and got stopped by the cops and before the incident was over the cops had called in backup (Linc was about 250 pounds at that time) and six cops all beat him up and put him in the hospital for four months.

Linc was still full of anger over this and anger over everything. Sister Wege started visiting with Linc as I visited with Carrie and she said that he had always wanted to go to school to be a vet since he is so good with animals but even that dream had been snuffed out by all his anger. Now he was suffering with allergies and has dropped all that weight until he is down to about 120 pounds. They had seen many doctors but don't really get much help.

It was a good visit and helped us understand a little more about their reasons for inactivity. I'm taking cupcakes to him today to just reaffirm that we care and want both of them to consider getting active in the Church and letting the Savior carry some of their sorrow and anger. I think Linc knew we cared and he could have left the shop after he initially responded, but he didn't. He kept hanging around like he just wanted us to know why he was justified in the life he is living. Hopefully we can keep working to help resolve some of these issues.

This afternoon we went with another Relief Society sister to visit teach a woman who suffers with delusions. We suspect that she has schizophrenia because she is here, there, and everywhere with her stories and conversation.

Part of the way through our visit she asked if she could give us money and if we could buy her some groceries and so Sister Wege and Sister Hulton went to the store and I stayed behind and visited with Mary.

For over an hour we sat on the front porch of her rickety old house, her wearing dark glasses and with a large umbrella held close down around her head so that the hover craft that she spotted several days ago doesn't somehow see her and transmit to the mother ship that she is outside. Our conversation went from the hovercraft and the sound that it makes to her experiences as a new convert and on to several other strange topics. We just kept sitting and she just kept talking. By the time Sister Wege got back from the store it had been over an hour and then we hurried off to our next appointment. Does this seem strange to you?

The really strange thing to me was that there I was, hundreds of miles away from home and its comforts, talking to a woman who is definitely mentally deranged and the whole time I was thinking how grateful I was to be there on that old porch sharing some time with this sister who for whatever reason, has lost touch with reality.

Not only was I grateful to be there but I knew beyond any doubt that Mary was precious to the Lord and He was using me to bless her. I also kept thinking that I couldn't think of anywhere else I would rather be right now than right here in this part of the Lord's vineyard tending His flock.

He loves us all. That truth has been reaffirmed to me again and again in the most unlikely of places with the most unlikely of people. And that understanding fills me with joy since it translates into the truth that each of us is also loved and treasured by the Lord and He is ready and willing to answer our needs and prayers in whatever situation we find ourselves. Isn't the gospel grand!!

Just a side note. One of the women we work with has a prosthetic leg. She can clip it off and on with the turn of a switch and she can walk with it with hardly a limp. Yesterday I was getting my hair cut and a young man came strolling into the beauty shop and walked right by me. He was wearing some knee shorts and I noticed that he had two prosthetic legs! If he hadn't been wearing shorts I would never have guessed that he had two artificial legs. I thought a person had to be in a wheelchair if they lost both legs but apparently not. He was so young that I suspect he lost his legs in Iraq or Afghanistan. It was so wonderful to see him so mobile and he walked with confidence and a big smile on his face! It was heart-warming to know that he will have a fairly normal life despite this early tragedy of the loss of his legs. Isn't science wonderful!!!!!!!!!!

Final story. This week I led a senior missionary choir for the monthly "Night of Inspiration and Music". When I was first ask it was like pulling teeth to get anyone to agree to sing but ultimately we had about 16 of us and it was a lot of fun. We thought we would call ourselves the "Old Duffers" or something appropriate like that. We were accompanied by two young sister missionaries who played the piano and viola and made us sound better than our old voices really were!

When I was recruiting I called the mission office couple, the Dougalls, and asked if they would sing and Sister Dougall said that she would and that she would talk to her husband although he was tone deaf and had never done anything like that before. I didn't give it much thought until he started showing up for practices and I was happy to have him join us.

That night after the program was over I was going around thanking everyone for singing and when I thanked Elder Dougall he admitted that he had just lip-synced the entire song. (I already knew that but didn't want him to know that I knew.) Later Sister Dougall explained what had happened. When she originally asked him about singing with our group, he thought it was his duty to be supportive. That was all it took for him to agree to sing: the word "duty". What a wonderful example to all of us. Bound by duty. I was touched by that and thought you would be, too.

September 23, 2012

We've had a relatively quiet week with steady visits and a zone conference. The zone conferences are always fun since we get to mingle with so many other missionaries and get instructed by President and Sister Matsumori as well as have a delicious meal hosted by one of the wards in the stake. Everyone treats us so well! When the time comes to remove my name badge it is going to be hard since right now we are treated like VIP's. Even those of other faiths treat us well. Some of them go out of their way to thank us for giving up our time to serve the Lord and others. The Mormon Moment that we are all hearing about is becoming an issue out here with people curious about our doctrine, our temples, and our welfare programs.

Yesterday while I was in the Family History Center a young couple came in asking if they could get some help with $$ for rent. We sent them to the Visitor's Center to get the name and number of the agent bishop in the area who disperses help for the truly needy. Our bishop said that the number of families requesting help has jumped up a huge amount lately. He said it is one of the most difficult things he faces as bishop: to help or not to help? Mike told me similar stories of people who always seem to be needy and unable to manage their resources wisely. He said that it keeps him awake at night worrying that there is someone in his ward boundaries that truly needs help and isn't getting it. I don't know if the segment on NBC a few weeks ago has highlighted the Church's outreach to the poor and so more people are asking or if the economic times are just tougher.

On our P-Day this week we visited Arlington Cemetery again and also toured the Kennedy Center. As a part of the cemetery tour we go through a home that was owned by Robert E. Lee before the Civil War but was taken over by Union Troops and the grounds around it were used for the burial of the soldiers who were dying in the Civil War. The Union forces did this so that if the Confederacy took back the home and grounds, they would have to deal with all the buried bodies. The plan worked and ultimately the area was sold for a small amount to the federal government and the Lee family got very little for their lost estate. One of the interesting things about this was that Robert E. Lee married a woman who was a descendant of George Washington.

As I have immersed myself in all of these historical places that I have visited over the last 10 months it has been intriguing to peek into the past and see how these early Americans lived and how they carved out a life for themselves as immigrants. I've come to appreciate more that the Civil War had a huge impact on this nation and that time in the nation's history was, after the Revolutionary War period, probably the most critical. The south truly was devastated and the north suffered its major losses not in properties but in human suffering and death. It is really quite amazing that those who accepted the gospel in Joseph Smith's day for the most part were removed from the anguish and loss. Not that the saints didn't have plenty of their own challenges but the Civil War was far away and the terrors of that event were not a part of the Mormon experience. I think there is a lesson in that for us.

Fast forward to the late 1980's and an assignment I was given to work on the Aid's Curriculum committee at the high school. We met weekly and went over all of the reports that were flooding the nation about the potential for a coming plague of Aids if the students weren't carefully taught how to deal with their sexuality in explicit terms. I was so troubled about this issue and trying to sort out truth from error that one day I mentioned it to President Bowman. He told me that he had something for me and later gave me a copy of an item in the Bulletin that Church leaders receive regularly from Salt Lake. In it in regards to Aids it said: "The membership of the Church will

for the most part avoid the plague of Aids if they will continue to be morally clean."

That was my answer. With this instruction I was able to voice to the committee that I felt that we didn't need to go to extreme measures to bring into the classroom explicit material on sexual orientation and practices. Many on the committee thought I was naive, which I probably was, but time and years have proven that Aids was largely a disease of the promiscuous and drug users and for the most part the rest of us have been protected and not touched by its terrible effects.

All of this makes me wonder about the future. What is coming for our nation and what counsel are we receiving right now from the prophets that will enable us to weather the storms that come. I think all the emphasis on solid families is the most critical counsel for our day but as conference approaches I know that I am going to be listening and praying for inspiration to hear the messages with an open heart and mind. The last few weeks have been so rewarding in terms of some of our efforts really bearing fruit. I've felt like all the visits, learning of sister's names, and other activities we have been involved with have really set a great foundation for the next nine months of my mission.

Imagine how dismayed I was this week when President Matsumori called and on the speaker phone with Sister Wege and I both listening he said that he had made it a matter of prayer and he was going to make some changes. He was transferring me to southern Maryland to work with Sister Brown and he was bringing Sister Harper here to replace me. He said that Harper/Brown had been companions for over a year and he felt that they needed a change. Since Sister Brown has health issues and is seeing a specialist in southern Maryland and since Sister Wege has already planned to do all the ticketing for the Christmas Festival of Lights it was only natural that I would join Sister Brown.

When he was telling us this on the phone, I felt my heart sink. I ask if that meant that I wouldn't be involved with the Christmas festivities and he said that it did but that I would replace Sister Harper at the temple. She and Sister Brown work one day a week at the temple and that is one of the things that they do that I'm really excited about. I was so shaken that I didn't respond but Sister Wege said of course we would do whatever he wanted us to do but I just sat there afraid that if I said anything I would cry. He asked if we were willing to accept this change. I managed a feeble "yes" and then spent the rest of the day hardly able to function.

Well, I have settled down, had my mail forwarded, packed my belongings, and I will be moving Thursday morning to Waldorf, Maryland. Of course, I have lots of questions about how this will all pan out but at least I can talk about it now and not choke up. I'm exercising faith that whatever it is that I'm supposed to do in southern Maryland, in time I will understand the inspiration behind this.

I'm grateful that I brought my family history stuff with me because I know that I will have some times when Sister Brown will be at doctor appointments and if I can work on my family history I will feel like I am being productive. My mission life here in D.C. has been so busy that I know it will be an adjustment for me. I'm feeling like I just need to get this move made and take it a day at a time right now. I guess one problem with being a pilot program is that it evolves as it goes along of necessity. The Church wants to continue this program and so those of us who are "piloting" it need to help shape it to be workable for other single sisters.

September 30, 2012

I survived the transfer and am finally feeling like this is home. I live in a lovely apartment on the third floor. In this stake the Women's Specialist program is handled differently. Instead of visiting in three wards, we visit each ward in the stake for two months. We are in the middle of a rotation right now so I'll only have three weeks in this ward but we do visits each day and hopefully will be able to help the leadership of the ward with some contacts. We are meeting with the bishop and Relief Society president in the Bowie Ward tomorrow and hoping to get a list of those who they feel are most in need of encouragement.

I arrived on the day of the annual Auxiliary Training Meetings. It was good to get to mix and mingle with the ward and stake leadership. The wards here are more traditional than I had in D.C. but there are wonderful people wherever I've gone and I'm sure that will prove to be the case here.

(Sunday) We have had a truly wonderful day. Last night the ward Relief Society had a dinner for all those attending the Women's broadcast and it was a wonderful opportunity for us to go table to table and meet sisters.

Then this morning we arrived early and greeted and made the acquaintance of several more

sisters. All the way home we went through the names of those we met and today enroute (one hour commute) we again went over names. Today at Church we met with the Bishop and R.S. President and got a list of their priorities as far as who we should visit. After meetings we set up appointments as the sisters mingled in the halls and then traveling home we called others and filled in our week.

It was satisfying to work with Sister Brown on setting up our week and talking over what we felt like would be the best use of our time. It was just what I have wanted to do for a long time. After we arrived home we spent three hours making phone calls and gathering information.

Another advantage of this new companionship is that we are in a rural area and so the traffic isn't so horrendous. The wards definitely aren't as diversified as in the Silver Spring Stake but it's fun to get to see another part of the state.

The biggest challenge of the week was trying to get internet. After a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, (and waiting in line at the AT&T store for 30 minutes) I finally got it figured out. I am now the owner of a small rectangular doohickey that sits on my desk and blinks blue at me and lets me have internet. It wasn't cheap but I pay less for rent here so it's about even when all is said and done. One thing about this apartment that is wonderful is that we aren't battling the cockroaches all the time. In Silver Spring we had to totally wipe everything dry (think kitchen sink, kitchen faucet) and leave cupboards open at night with the kitchen light on since they flourish in the dark. We had to encase every bag of flour, sugar, and crackers in plastic bags to discourage the roaches, and we left a napkin on the counter so we could just grab it and try to mash them before they escaped into any nook or cranny. We put any food that we didn't refrigerate such as bananas in the microwave.

I'm looking forward to working in the temple again as a part of this assignment, too. These sisters started working in the temple when they first arrived last September (2011) and then the President of the temple decided that he didn't want to mix black badge missionaries with white badge missionaries and so Sister Wege and I didn't get that opportunity. It will be good to keep up with my memorization so that I can maybe work in the Idaho Falls Temple again.

Well, I'm going to bed. It's late and I'm tired. I love and miss all of you but feel a peace about life and feel that I'm where I'm supposed to be at this time in my life. I appreciate all of you children keeping touch and appreciate your encouragement these last two weeks. I think I'm going to survive and maybe even grow to like it here. Maryland is such a beautiful state and already the leaves are starting to turn.

I miss harvest……such a big part of my life for a long time. I miss the smells and getting bags of potatoes to see me through the winter. I miss the unity that I feel in the community when everyone is focused on getting the crops out, the gardens cleared off, and football season is in full swing. But most of all I miss all of you. Camille called me tonight with some questions that she was interviewing two people for a health class assignment.

After the interview we talked about her, Maddie, and Emma all going to early morning seminary before their school day begins. I never did that and I marvel that they will do it. Hats off to them!

October 6, 2012

Just finished my weekly report and got it transmitted to our district leader, the bishop of our host ward, and the Relief Society president. We've had a good week, visiting several sisters who haven't been inside the Church for many years.

One young sister told us that she started going inactive when her parents were both killed in a double homicide! She and her siblings were divided up among relatives and when she was old enough to be on her own, she left, although she is still in touch with her siblings but they live in the west and she has been here on the East Coast for many years. She just recently had a baby, her first, and so she was home when we knocked on her door. She married a Muslim about three years ago and neither of them have much to do with their respective religions. We invited her to Church and asked if she would accept visiting teachers or home teachers but she didn't say aye or nay.

It was difficult to visit with her as she was very emotionally "flat" and I'm still trying to figure out why. We couldn't get any kind of a feel for her true feelings and both Sister Brown and I came away from the visit unsure of where to go from here. I guess we will report it to the ward leaders and let them work with her.

Another sister we visited was raised in West Jordan and even knew where Gardner's Mill and Village was when I mentioned my connection with

West Jordan. She and her husband are both members on the roster but neither of them have been to worship services in many, many years. She was so sweet to us and said that lately she has been feeling like she wants to have prayer in her life. She had just this week gone to the library to find books on that topic, so she was happy when we dropped in and she was able to visit with us.

She and her two daughters will be leaving for Bahrain in the Middle East where her husband has just been deployed to. They have never been with him on a military assignment and she and the girls have never been overseas so this is a huge adventure for them. I was able to share my experiences with Grandma and Grandpa Richards living in Pakistan and of Becky and John and their families surviving in Korea and China. She invited us to come back before they leave and we are encouraging her to look up the Church when she gets there and find some LDS friends who share her values. When I checked on lds.org I found that there is a branch of the Church in Bahrain so hopefully they will be able to connect.

Everyone has a history and story. It's been so amazing to get acquainted with all of these sweet sisters. We had dinner last night with a couple who are from Dominican Republic and Colombia. The husband from Colombia is battling cancer and so they have had to downsize and he has been through months of sickening chemo.

Right now the cancer is in remission but since he lost his job because of his health problems he has a lot of time on his hands. He has become interested in Family History work and found a book published by one of the early settlers in Colombia and Venezuela. He has been doing the temple work for the names he has extracted from the book which was written by a fellow who immigrated from Spain to Central and South America. It has been a very spiritual journey for him and he knows that he is doing what the Lord wants him to be doing at this time in his life. He and his wife are such strong members and are really converted to the gospel!

My new companion and I are getting along great. She has asked me to share the driving duty and so I've been behind the wheel for the first time in nine months. I've enjoyed it although even here in central Maryland the traffic is horrendous: bumper to bumper.

Sister Brown is very thoughtful of me and my desires and we have been able to work hand in hand in making appointments, scheduling visits and activities, and in teaching the gospel. We move slower than Sister Wege and I did, but President Matsumori told me not to let that worry me so I'm trying to enjoy the slower pace and spend a little more time with personal study.

Yesterday was kind of a killer for Sister Brown. She received word that her renter is using her house for her chiropractic business and that it is against the subdivision covenants and this renter needs to move out. It is really upsetting since this lady was not only paying the monthly mortgage but had an option to buy and was going to buy the home, too.

Well, a neighbor notified the homeowners association and so now Sister Brown is worried that she will lose this wonderful renter and the home sale. It has been an emotional day with phone calls to her bishop and to the homeowner's committee chairman as she has tried to plead her case. She is a trooper and doing her best to focus on the work despite this upset.

I'm looking forward to conference tomorrow. I'm going to try to watch it on my computer. Normally we would use this as a great missionary opportunity but the ward we are presently working in is over an hour's drive away so we are going to catch the session right here in our apartment. Hope all of you can get it. Sam will arrive home next Monday. The family is so excited! Give Sam a big hug.

(Saturday night) P.S. How can I close this without mentioning President Monson's announcement this morning regarding the lower missionary ages! How absolutely wonderful! So happy that the young women will be able to serve at 19! I can just imagine how this news hit Sam and SaraKay who will remember this momentous announcement as coming during their time as full-time missionaries. What a huge change this will be especially for the young women!

I'm also thinking about my sons and grandsons scattered across the globe and hoping that everyone will be able to attend the Priesthood session. I recall past Priesthood sessions, ice cream sundaes, pie and ice cream, and Daddy reviewing with us, with his copious notes, the talks at the session. What a wonderful family tradition! I hope that everyone will be able to enjoy another sweet day of conference tomorrow.

October 14, 2012

Fall is finally here. The leaves are turning colors and today there was a nip in the air and a crisp breeze that made it seem more like the autumns I'm familiar with in Idaho. One of the sisters we visited yesterday said that her favorite thing about living in the East is the long, beautiful fall season. She said it isn't unusual to have 2 to 2 and 1/2 months of fall weather! I'm looking forward to watching it all happen since last year I didn't arrive until January and all the foliage was gone by then.

Our days are sometimes long but the weeks are short. We've had a good week with some very meaningful visits but we've also had a few appointments cancel and that leaves us with times in the middle of the day with nothing planned. We usually take some reading material to fill the time, but with October being our last month in the Bowie Ward, we are pressed to finish up visiting the sisters recommended to us. With so many women in the work force, catching women home during the day is quite difficult; we've been told to not be out after dark. Consequently, we spend a lot of time on the phone lining up appointments, drive an hour to an hour and a half to get to our area, and then have a couple of visits and drive home another hour and a half.

After three in the afternoon the traffic is horrendous and we creep along until at last we arrive home, grateful for the safety and security of our warm apartment.

I've enjoyed my new situation because it is such a beautiful, rural area with rolling wooded hills, scenic rivers, and picturesque homes and farms. The downside is that we service eight wards, two months apiece, and that just isn't enough time to build relationships. We hustle to get into each home at least once but as far as really having satisfying relationships or building bonds, it just can't happen on such a short time-table. And because this stake is so scattered, we travel huge distances for very little success.

Okay, so I've said my piece and tomorrow I'll go out and knock on some more doors and do what I'm supposed to do. But I am composing a letter that I will forward to the coordinator of this pilot program and make some suggestions about what works and what doesn't.

I'm enjoying Sister Brown. She is easy to live with and we're both sharing the "senior companion" role. I'm helping with the driving and she's glad for the relief. We both make phone calls and line up our days and she loves to shop so I don't have to wait and worry about when I can pick up the things that I need from the mall. Sister Brown has some health issues so I'm trying to not get impatient and not push too hard. President Matsumori told me to relax a little and I know that one of my purposes here is to help my companion have a good experience so I'm trying to back off a little.

Several of you have asked about the extended family. Everyone is busy and good things are happening. Steph and Linds are just two days away from having Sam home; Shauntel and Randy are chasing four kids, all going in different directions; Steve and Bonnie are nearly ready to send Rachel off to BYU-I; Dave and Andrea are helping Laurel submit mission papers, Becky and Jeff's evenings are filled with homework and more homework; John and Laurel's family are back together after all their trips; Mike and Marci are enjoying having everyone getting a little older and Tanner on the verge of walking; Paul and Jenny just had her parents and the Johnson grandparents at their home for Ben's baptism; Tim is excited for the upcoming temple rededication activities; and SaraKay is doing great.

October 21, 2012

It’s beautiful outside today. This whole week has been a bit chilly but today the temperatures are in the 70's. On this rotation we drive an hour each way to a town called Bowie. It's pronounced BoooEeeee! Kind of appropriate for this time of year! I have wanted to tell the residents that it should be pronounced Bow (as in bow tie) Ee but I suspect no one would believe me so I'm just going along with local custom and now I'm calling it BooEe, too.

The highway between here and there is lined with thick forests and of course, right now there are wonderful shades of orange, red, yellow, brown, and greens. It's such a pleasure to make that trip each day and think about this earth and its beauty! Speaking of weather; I got a call from Tim this week informing me that Blackfoot and Boise had some extreme wind storms and that one of my pine trees on the south east corner of the yard had been blown over! Melanie called him to see if she should notify me or just not bother me with the news.

Tim wisely told her that I would want to know and that he would notify me of the mishap. I called

Melanie and she said that after the windstorm Reed had gone over to check the house and everything seemed to be okay so it came as a surprise when Debbie and Bruce Ellis went over to check on their horses and discovered it. It was fortunate that it didn't hit anything or cause other damage. I was making arrangements to have it cut up when Melanie called back and said that the Ellis's had already moved it, cut it up, and restored order. My neighbors are so good to me!

Just to give you an idea of the power of the storm. Tim was driving in it and parked and proceeded to get out of his car. The wind caught his car door and flung it so hard that it damaged the door of the car next to it and he is using his insurance to cover damages! Melanie said that there were others in the ward who lost trees so I guess I should be grateful that I didn't lose any more than I did.

The work here is going fine. I found out today that a sister from Mississippi has been called to replace either Sister Brown or Harper in February. She is Sister Boone and has 10 children. I bet I know the family that she married into because some of our best friends at BYU were Daniel and Dorinda Boone. In fact, I've often told the story of how we were getting acquainted with them and I started calling Daniel, Dan. After a few times of being addressed as Dan, he said to me, "Sue, my friends call me Daniel". Imagine that with a big southern draaaaaaaaaaaaaaawl and you get the idea. I never called him Dan again. Yes, he is a direct descendant of the famous Daniel Boone!

I thought that I would include a couple of stories that were related to us in our visits this week. They both have to do with the temple.

One sister told of attending the temple to do baptisms with her teenage son. They were doing extended family names and the sister was seated in an area watching the baptismal font as her son was being baptized. She could hear the names as they were read during the ordinance and while she was watching she became aware that the face of a man was moving through the font room in the air. She wasn't able to totally understand what was happening and even questioned that she had really seen what she thought she saw.

As her son completed the baptisms and came out of the dressing room, one of the witnesses to the baptisms approached her and asked if she knew a particular gentleman who had been one of those baptized that day. She said that it was her husband's great uncle and that he had been crippled all of his life and been on crutches because of this birth defect. The ordinance worker then said, "He was here today to witness this ordinance. I saw him in the font area when his name was read!"

Upon returning home this sister did some investigative work and found a picture of this great uncle and sure enough, it was the man who she had seen during the baptismal session.

This sister was a recent convert at the time and she has never forgotten the experience!

Another sister is an avid genealogist and has done a lot of research and submitted the work. One day she and her husband went to the temple to do the sealings for several of the couples she had researched and prepared. As she was in the elevator going to the sixth floor, she became aware that there were two personages in the elevator with her. When she arrived at the sixth floor her husband was waiting for her and the two of them walked down the hall towards a sealing room. The couple walked behind them and this sister asked her husband and he too saw them and described them to her. She knew immediately who they were.

As they entered the sealing room, they were no longer visible but she knew that they were there for this important ordinance in their behalf. Although she has done hundreds of names and been involved with temple work for many years, this was the only time that she has had anything of this nature happen. She doesn't know why it happened then but was grateful since it just reaffirmed to her that her efforts were appreciated.

It was interesting to me that both of these sisters knew they had a spiritual manifestation but neither of them could totally describe it and when they did, they knew that their description was inadequate. Never-the-less, the experiences were real and are certainly a tender mercy. I'm so grateful that the temple is in my mission and that each week I get to attend and soak up the experience. Know that most days I include the names of many of you on the prayer rolls. Each time I go through the veil I ponder on the words said and the promises given regarding my posterity. I know that we are truly upheld and strengthened as individuals and families because of priesthood power. I hope that most of you are able to make temple worship a priority in your lives.

One of the fun things about being a companion to Sister Brown is that she is close to my age and Sister Wege was ten years younger and so with Sister Wege some of my senior moments weren't appreciated But, with Sister Brown being so close to my age we do a lot of the same stupid things and we'll get to laughing about just how crazy we are.

The other night we were trying to unpack a new computer printer and get it set up ourselves without having to yell, "uncle" and have someone younger and smarter come help us. Both of us have relied on our computer-literate husbands and being on our own like this is pretty scary. We were trying to install the ink cartridges and we were reading the instructions very carefully and doing all we could to follow the diagram. It just seemed like the cartridge was more difficult to insert than they should be and so we were pushing on them and yet not putting too much pressure.

Daddy would always say, "Don't force it!" He would say that so much that it came into my mind and so we were kind of pushing but not forcing. All at once I looked at the diagram and it came to me that we had the cartridges upside down. We had not thought of turning them upside right since we thought the ink would come pouring out of that little hole in the top which was open from our clipping off the little yellow tab-shaped thing-a-ma-jig.

When we realized that we had put them in upside down we had to use a table knife to "carefully, so carefully" pop them out. And wala! They clicked right in and no ink came pouring out!

If you are saying to yourselves, what a couple of dits, you are right! But we're the best dits the Lord has right now in this Waldorf area and we're making it work despite our lack of experience. I'm sure that by now Ron Brown and Steve Larsen have become acquainted in heaven and are taking turns watching over us and prompting us with issues such as this.

One thing I have learned is that most people take pity on grey-haired older ladies and I have learned to use that to my advantage. We can get in to homes that younger missionaries have been unsuccessful in getting into and store clerks are very sweet to us. Like when we needed help with the old printer that we were trying to salvage so we didn't have to buy a new one, I just carried the old printer into Office Depot, walked up to the clerks that were on the floor and said, "HELP!" and several clerks came to my aid! They take one look at my grey hair and my wrinkly skin and they know immediately that I need help with all things technological.

My generation's reputation precedes me. Anyway, I've learned that most people have a grandma and they wouldn't want her out on the streets, bewildered, so they help us out!

I need to close and start setting up this week's appointments. When we get to this point in the two-month rotation, we are hunting down the hard-to-find sisters who in all likelihood are not found because they are consciously hiding from the Church and don't want to be found. So....making these phone calls is far from pleasant but has to be done. In the end, if we do get into these homes, we are amazed at the goodness of these sisters and can honestly say, "Come back. Come back and feast at the table of the gospel and let the Savior back into your life!" It's a wonderful work and I'm so grateful to be immersed in it right now. Love to all.

October 28, 2012

We've had an interesting week! Last Sunday the Stake Relief Society President took us to the Capitol Ward to meet with their leadership and prepare for visiting in their ward for the months of November and December. We've been working in Bowie and had a lot of loose ends to tie up. Last Sunday Sister Brown starting feeling sick and by Sunday evening she was congested and coughing. Before we went to bed, she commented that I should plan to go to our Monday appointments alone since she knew she wasn't going to feel up to it. Sure enough, she coughed all night Sunday night and by Monday morning she was in no shape to go anywhere. Since I have shared the driving since moving here to Waldorf, I figured that I could handle it so Monday I left about 11:00 and spent the day visiting and locating the last of the sisters on our "Rescue" list. Thank goodness for our wonderful Garmin GPS! It was lonely driving myself around but Mrs. Garmin kept me company and for the most part I was able to fulfill our commitments.

Tuesday Sister Brown wasn't much improved and so I headed to Bowie again. We had an appointment Tuesday evening in Suitland Ward so I left Bowie about five and found my way to Suitland to the stake center. I arrived about an hour early so I sat and read for a while in the parking lot. What I hadn't figured on was how

early it gets dark these days and soon I was sitting in the dark, feeling quite foolish for putting myself in this situation. I tried to imagine what I would say in my defense if I got mugged and President Matsumori asked me what I was doing sitting alone in the dark in a parking lot in a busy city. By the time the ward Relief Society presidency arrived at 7:00 I was thoroughly spooked and promised myself that if Sister Brown couldn't make it, I wouldn't set any appointments for evenings ever again.

We had a good meeting. Sister Goodwin, the Relief Society president and an immigrant from England, gave me a six-page handout of all the sisters in the ward. Guess how many? Over 318! As we went through the names, many of them had never been out to a meeting and the leadership knew nothing about their situations or history! What an overwhelming task for these ward leaders! All of the wards we have served in have had large numbers of sisters that needed some attention but this was the most needy one yet! We went down through the names and asterisked the ones that we needed to locate and contact. We didn't complete the list because it got so late and I had an hour's drive ahead of me to get home.

One of the counselors lives on the Andrews Air Force Base and she told me to follow her and she would get me out onto the freeway and make sure I didn't take a wrong turn. I appreciated her concern for me. After being gone for nearly 12 hours I pulled into the parking lot of our apartment building and felt so relieved that I was home safe and sound.

Wednesday was our temple day and Sister Brown was still too sick to go but she suggested that I go ahead anyway and I did. The GPS was pretty clear on most of the directions but it directed me to exit at a different place than I had ever gone before and I ended up in the heart of Silver Springs with bumper to bumper traffic. With four lanes of traffic and the GPS telling me to exit in 500 ft to the right....driving suddenly got complicated. I missed the exit and found myself mired in traffic and not sure just what to do. I was already running late because of a traffic slowdown on the freeway and so I worried that I would miss my session. Fortunately, I got things figured out and arrived with just minutes to spare.

When I finally sat down in the session I felt such relief! The rest of the day was a delight and after two sessions I left for home. After a few missed cues, I finally found the right freeway and again felt a huge relief when I finally arrived home in one piece. By Thursday Sister Brown was on the mend and we left that afternoon, tracked down some more sisters, left contact information, and then met with the Bowie Relief Society president to visit some sisters who she had been concerned about. She has lived in the Bowie Ward for about 30 years but despite her knowledge of the area, finding the homes in the dark was a trick and we finally resorted to driving very slowly up and down the street, shining a big flashlight at the house to locate the house number so that we knew which house was the one we were hunting.

At one point we noticed a couple of the neighbors peering out at us through their curtains. We couldn't really blame them since I would probably feel the same way if I saw a carload of people slowly driving up and down the street, shining a big flashlight at the houses! Again, we reminded ourselves that there is no good reason to be out after dark on strange streets looking for people!

Friday we completed our reports for the month and the Bowie Ward visits and prepared new area books for Capitol Ward. I started on the new rosters and was able to get some work lined up for us on Monday. Then as we watched the evening news we became aware of the storm that is predicted to hit this area on Sunday afternoon. We received an email from the mission office informing us that we needed to have plenty of water storage, batteries for flash lights, a tank full of gas, and food on hand that didn't need cooking or refrigeration. We followed their directions and headed to town to get what we needed.

Already many of the shelves were bare especially of bottled water and bread. We continued watching the news and weather last night and learned that this storm is a combination of a tropical hurricane coming from the south and a Northeasterner bringing cold winter weather from the north. They are predicting that this storm will be worse than any since 1938! We are on alert and not sure what the days ahead will bring. Luckily we don't have any humongous trees that could fall on our apartment building. They have dubbed the hurricane "Sandy" but they are also calling it Frankenstorm! I guess we'll see how it goes.

Saturday morning was an all-mission conference with Quinton L. Cook and his wife being the guest speakers. He took time for question and answers about the age changes for missionaries and

talked about the goals of working more effectively with the wards and of training new missionaries quicker and more effectively. He also talked about the inception of the "Preach My Gospel" manual and the importance of us studying it carefully. He made a comment that was similar to what Mike and Marci mentioned to me after the announcement: that the Church will be strengthened because more sisters will have the missionary experience in their lives.

He also said that often when missionaries would say that the investigator has his or her agency that that is true but that much of the investigator's response will be determined by the faith of the missionary and the preparation of his/her life. President Cook commented that one of our goals should be to leave the ward we are serving in stronger and on a higher level spiritually than when we found it.

It is always fun to gather for these meetings. Especially now that I am living away from the Visitor's Center, I miss seeing the young sister missionaries and all the senior couples who work there. I also miss most of the events and so I'm not seeing a lot of the new couples who have come in. It's amazing the turnover in this mission!!! I'm quickly becoming one of the veterans with my months of service nearing a year. Even though I miss the V.C. and those activities, I have enjoyed my time here in the Suitland Stake and feel that we are needed and appreciated by the good saints here.

Today is the calm before the storm. Traffic was busy as usual as we made our way to Bowie for our last Sunday with them. Lots of sweet good-byes although we feel like we've hardly gotten acquainted with most of the members in the ward. Everyone was talking about the upcoming storm but when the block of meetings was over, we hurried home without any problems. We've had the news channel on and can't believe what's going on: schools closed, thousands evacuated, all kinds of warnings about having adequate water and non-perishable food on hand. Some of the newscasts showing the ocean along the shores of the Carolinas are truly frightening. It really makes a person happy to live in Idaho!

I am going to send this letter off and hopefully when this storm hits tonight and tomorrow, we will have power. They predict 10,000,000 homes without power from Delaware all the way down the coast to Florida. I'll try to keep touch. If we do lose power, it might be several days before it is restored so be patient and I will try to phone to keep you posted.

I have had Steph and Linds and their family on my mind this weekend. I'm sure they have had a time of rejoicing! Steph said that Sam's report to the high council was the highlight for them. They were so proud of him! I'm sure they had a great time today with so many of family gathering. I'm also sure that the last week has been a sweet experience with Sam home and time to visit, unencumbered by school and work.

In Elder Quinton's talk on Saturday, he promised every missionary there that the day would come when they would look back at their missionary service and they would know without a doubt that many of the blessings that have been in their life have come because they willingly gave this service to the Lord. He reaffirmed that to us senior missionaries and said that our posterity would be blessed in ways not now fully known and appreciated.

By the way.........Joseph passed his Eagle Board of Review this week and is officially an Eagle! Way to go Joseph! I appreciate all the prayers for SaraKay's safety. I know the mission president is aware and won't put them in harm's way intentionally. Please continue your prayers and know that many of you are weekly put on the Washington D.C. temple rolls.

November 4, 2012

It's been an exciting but stressful week here in Maryland. As you are all aware, the storm of the century visited our area on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday and we spent a great deal of time watching the news reports and tracking "Sandy's" progress from the Atlantic and on into New York and New Jersey. We were on alert here in the mission as well and were told to get plenty of bottled water, food that didn't need cooking or refrigeration, and to stay in and off the highways. We were more than glad to oblige since it was cold and miserable out and no one really knew just how hard our area would get hit.

Since being in this mission I have become aware of one of the foremost dangers that any storm presents: falling trees! I have seen the wind topple huge trees and uproot them or snap them off in a moment. Depending on where the tree falls, the results can be scary, an inconvenience, or truly life threatening. The last big windstorm brought down trees on cars, blocked roads and one home right across from the temple entrance

was literally sheared off down the front half, exposing the remaining walls and furnishings within. Usually no one is hurt but the warning went out with this storm that families should remain in their lower levels and even in the basement to protect against falling trees.

After a windstorm in August and so many fallen trees, I was asking myself why this is such an issue in this area and I came up with one reason: the trees don't have to work very hard for the moisture they get since it is always raining out here so the roots don't go down very deep and a bad wind pushes against the mass of leaves and over it goes.

"Sandy" was different, though. All of the rain that preceded the worst of the wind had so thoroughly saturated the soil that it was soggy and the roots didn't have a lot to hold on to. We watched videos on the weather channel that had been taken by residents when their trees started to topple. One tree's root ball was about 11 feet high when tipped on its side with the length of the tree lying prone. Imagine the damage that could have done if it had landed on top of a house!

Well, as was testified to in our Sunday meetings today, this area truly dodged the "Sandy bullet" and we all are feeling so grateful but at the same time, heartsick for those on the coast, especially in New Jersey and New York, who got hit the hardest and some of whom lost literally all of their worldly possessions to the raging sea or the flaming inferno! How devastating!

The rest of our week was fairly mild compared to the windy beginning. On Tuesday we helped a family move into a new home and began our time in the Capitol Ward. We were joined by several of the ward members as well as six full-time Elders who were fellowshipping this sweet young family.

Wednesday was temple and family history assignments and Thursday we did more visiting and writing up the week's reports. Paul and Jenny were coming in Friday afternoon so Sister Brown helped me shop and get things ready for our company. I so appreciated all she did to make their visit workable. Sharing this apartment with a roommate makes having company a little trickier and she was a real trooper.

On Friday we met Paul and Jenny at the temple. The original plan was to meet them at the Visitor's Center and show them around as well as to introduce them to many of the missionaries who have become my dear friends.

I was so disappointed when we received the news that due to a host of problems, the Visitor's Center would be closed all week.

So plan B: we met at the temple and swapped cars and let Paul and Jenny take Sister Brown's car and we drove their car home with the children (and car seats and booster seats and all their paraphernalia.) We had a pleasant ride home despite the terrible traffic and Paul and Jenny got in an initiatory session and then drove to join us in Waldorf.

On Saturday we drove to Mount Vernon and spent the day learning all about George Washington and how he and his family lived. It was so cold and miserable that we didn't spend the time on the grounds that we normally would have but we did spend several hours going through the museum, the mansion house, outbuildings, slave quarters, and also got to see several very good movies about different occasions in George's illustrious life.

Paul and Jenny's kids were so well behaved and were pleasant to be with (except for a wild run to the bathroom with Daniel). Paul and Jenny got a hotel room for them and Daniel and Kate, and I had the three oldest stay here with me which was really fun for Grandma (and hopefully for them, too!) Jenny is about a month away from having her baby and is more than ready for her arrival! I was amazed at how much the kids have grown; especially Daniel and Kate. Nothing shows the passage of time like the growth of children. It is so joyous to see them becoming the people they will one day be. Kate is talking like a four-year-old and several times had us chuckling at her antics. As we arrived home yesterday from Mount Vernon, hungry and tired and anxious to get home, Kate yelled, "Okay, kids, straighten up and get in the house!" or something to that effect. It just sounded so funny coming from a two-year-old.

Today was our first Sunday in the Capitol Ward so I told Paul and Jenny that I didn't know very many of the ward members to introduce them to but they made themselves right at home and the ward really welcomed them. We arrived about 10 minutes early so we were seated before most of the congregation but even the door greeter went out of his way to come to our bench and welcome them to the meetings! He said that it was his responsibility to make sure that each new family got a warm welcome! I am so impressed with this ward and its leadership and

diversity. There are a lot of new members and they come from all over the world. It has its challenges but I enjoy meeting all these people and watching them grow in the gospel. Today in Sunday School I could hear the lady behind me saying, "Amen" or "Hallelujah" after several comments by the teacher and it seemed almost normal.

I wondered today if Paul and Jenny were smiling inside when the prayers were given in unorthodox ways and when the singing was led without any concern about a down beat. One of the sisters talked about the Elders dropping by and offering to "lay their hands on me" and how the blessing she received was exactly what she had needed.

Who can doubt that the Lord and his angels are working overtime to answer the prayers and promises in the lives of these newest members of the Church! Their faith is an example for us all! When the Savior ministered among the people he sometimes would comment about the faith of the Gentiles and say that their faith was greater than any among the children of Abraham. I feel like that among these converts. They may not know the gospel or the meanings of all things but they do have great faith and are open about their gratitude for the blessings of the gospel in their lives.

After our meetings we came home and spent the afternoon with dinner and visiting. Later we went for a walk around a little pond that is a part of this subdivision. We originally were going to drive to show the kids the Atlantic Ocean near Chesapeake Bay but it would have taken an hour to get there and an hour to get back and then they had another couple of hours to get to Jenny's cousin's place in Frederick so we opted for a walk around the hiking trail. There were lots of Canadian geese who welcomed the bread crumbs the kids tossed and a beautiful blue heron who charmed us with his beautiful winged flight. Again, the cold along with the wind made our outing less than ideal but it was still a pleasant thing to walk and talk with Paul and Jenny and watch the kids feed the geese.

Paul and Jenny and all the kids really made a fuss over Sister Brown. We invited her to join us on our outings and I know that she felt welcome although the cold makes her arthritis act up and she decided against going. Paul and Jenny left about 7:00 and will spend the night with her cousin. I so appreciated them finding time to visit me, but I will feel relieved when I know they are safely home and all's well. Keep Jenny in your prayers these next few weeks.

Let me close with a story. A month ago just before I was transferred I had an interesting experience. We had taken a convert with us to do some visiting teaching to a less active sister. We wanted to include her (Sharon) in on the lesson so we decided to teach the story of the First Vision and to have Sharon read one of the passages as her part of the lesson. Now as a regular life-long member of the Church, I have heard the Joseph Smith story told many times so in my mind I had a certain expectation of what the chosen passage would sound like. Well, I should have known that Sharon, being a fairly new member and having an educator's background, would want to give this passage as impressively and meaningfully as possible. As she began to read ......Verse 17: "It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered…" Normally this verse would have a very reverential feeling but as Sharon read it she gave it a truly dramatic flair and then as the verse came to its climax she raised her voice almost to a holler and gestured with her arms and gave it everything she had!! It struck me first with such amazement and then as so funny that it was all I could do to keep from laughing right out loud!

Fortunately, I kept myself under control and completed the lesson but later, thinking back on the experience, I was reminded just how much these new converts have to absorb and learn when they are gathered into the gospel net.

Best close. Although daylight savings time says it is 8:54 my biological clock says 10:00 and time for bed. Headed tomorrow to the Andrews Air Force Base to visit military wives and families. Good week ahead........no natural disasters are predicted as far as I know.

November 11, 2012

I've had a sweet Sunday today. I met some more ward members, enjoyed the lessons and talks, and rejoiced in the goodness of life! The weather has warmed up and although the air is crisp, it is still pleasant. While making our round of visits this past week it was enjoyable to be outside, smelling fall in the air and watching the local residents finish up their leaf raking in preparation for the winter months ahead. I attended meetings alone today. Sister Brown wasn't feeling well and I was grateful that she's okay to let me move ahead with the work in her absence. I miss her when she's sick, especially when I am driving and I need a navigator to decipher what the GPS is

saying. Luckily some of the area is becoming more familiar to me and I arrived at Church with only one minor detour.

It's taken me several days to lift myself out of the gloom of the election results. I really thought that Romney might pull it off but when Hurricane Sandy settled in and President Obama was on the news making promises in regards to rescue efforts, I couldn't help but feel that it might be hard for Romney to make up for all the free press that Obama was receiving. Another ad that kept playing and replaying for Obama quoted Romney as saying that 47% of Americans have an attitude of entitlement and that things need to change.

The Obama camp really played that for all it was worth and had Romney cutting all kinds of social programs to balance the budget, scaring a lot of welfare recipients into thinking that their livelihoods were being threatened. Another big issue the Obama people pushed was that Romney would cut way back on Social Security.

Besides all of that, it didn't escape my attention that the Lord could have averted the storm of the century in the first place. Why He didn't is beyond me but I think I've learned to just trust in the Lord and know that He is in charge and His ways are not my ways. I guess I have come to recognize that fact in regards to politics and American history more since being here near the nation's capital than ever before. As I have toured the museums and studied about the different challenges that have come to our nation over the generations, I've seen that the Lord's hand is in the details and that He is at the helm and will have His will accomplished even if it isn't with a Mormon as president.

Maryland was a loser in other areas on Tuesday. They voted for a huge new casino and gambling rights and for same-sex marriages. I kept reminding myself that the Lord will not force anything upon us and that the people had their choice but it was still a disappointing evening. Sister Brown and I arrived home from a service project on Tuesday and settled in for the evening, hoping to see a miracle but it didn't happen and when we finally went to bed at 1:00 we both had dreams about the election. I can't even imagine how devastating it must have been for the Romney's. I was so grateful for the news release from the Church extolling the whole Romney family for their involvement "at the highest levels" and encouraging us all to pray for the new administration. So I am.

You might be interested to know that a memo went out Tuesday afternoon to all the young missionaries in our mission. It gave instructions that they were not to be out Tuesday night and that they were to stay in their apartments Wednesday. If they had appointments for Wednesday already set up, they were to ask a ward member to drive them and they were not to be out walking or riding bikes at all the day after the election. Interesting.....

I want to comment on an observation I have made since arriving here in January. In Silver Spring I lived in a high-rise apartment that housed a large population of Jews.

Having never been around Jews much it was of particular interest to me to affiliate with them. I am not aware of all the different types of Judaism but the males who lived in the apartment building wore small skull caps whenever they were out in public. This was the same for even the very young boys. As a whole, despite Sister Wege's and my efforts to befriend them, they were very cool towards us and seldom would strike up a conversation. They weren't rude or antagonistic, but were a little guarded. Most of the women dressed very conservatively including long dark colored skirts and very drab attire. The men often were seen caring for their children and families walked together on Friday night to attend the local synagogues.

Their Sabbath was Friday night to Saturday night and although some women attended it was often just the men. They would hurry home from work, change into their dark suits and fringed aprons and tall stovepipe hats, and walk in groups to the nearest place of worship.

When it was the Feast of Tabernacle week they asked permission to construct a simple tented enclosure on the grounds of the apartment complex and the management sent out a memo to all of us residents that the structure would be built and remain in place during holy week.

Now fast forward to the last month living here in southern Maryland. I haven't seen any followers of Judaism but I have seen a lot of Amish. They are everywhere with their horse and buggies, their strict black dresses and white caps, and their men in black trousers and shirts and sideburns with heavy beards. They own a great deal of real estate and maintain beautiful farms. They keep to themselves except for the tourist trade that they support with their sale of well-built furniture, beautiful quilts, garden and baked goods, and

other handicrafts that bring a lot of people into the area. They have large families, discourage intermarriage, and live a simple lifestyle including no electricity or anything motorized. Local laws say that if there is an Amish buggy on the road, it always has preference over a motorized vehicle and fines enforce the preference.

Now for the observation. We as LDS really have a lot in common with other religious groups. We keep laws that sometimes separate us from the general public (Word of Wisdom), wear clothing that sets us apart, discourage marriage outside of our faith, have our own culture and customs, work hard to be successful, and try to be peace loving.

In all of my experiences out here there has never been a time that I have wanted to injure or destroy either of these two groups' faith or ways. I admire them for their devotion and am grateful that they enjoy the freedom to live as they see fit. And it appears to me that most of the other residents feel the same.

Then why is it that Mormonism has been such a target since it's restoration and that there are those who resent our religion and people? As I make phone calls and try to visit less active members, I often feel that animosity.

Occasionally someone will express their anger and even threaten to call the police if we come back on their property. They will deride our doctrine and the worst ones are not the nonmembers but the less actives who have for whatever reason grown cold in their testimonies. Logically you would think that having missionaries come to their door would be seen as an act of concern for them but it isn't. The only explanation I have come up with (aside from the occasional situation where a member of the church is obnoxious or underhanded) is that this work is divine and that Satan rages against it on every front.

I need to get some appointments set up. We've got a fun week ahead: Relief Society soup social; feeding the single airman and the families of deployed soldiers (on Andrews Air Force Base) a Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, and an emergency preparedness fair on Saturday. I joined the ward choir today and we are singing Christmas songs and that's always a pick-me-up-er! Sister Brown is feeling better tonight and the forecast is for 60+ weather this week. Who could ask for anything more! Love to all. Mom

November 18, 2012

It doesn't seem possible that Thanksgiving is on the horizon! It seems like Thanksgiving is always sooner than it should be and of course, then Christmas is right on its heels. We had a place to go for the holiday but the family had a change of plans so we are planning to do our own dinner here. We received notice from President Matsumori that we need to check with the full-time Elders in our area and make sure that they have a place to go for the day. If not, we'll include them in our festivities. It will be nice to have a couple of days off from our regular routine. On Friday I am meeting Teresa Vanfleet in D.C. and we are going to lunch together. Probably not the best day to be out and about with it being the biggest shopping day of the year, but it should be fun anyway.

We've had a busy week complete with a Relief Society dinner and a service project on Andrews Air Force Base providing a Thanksgiving dinner for all the families of deployed airmen as well as the single airmen and those staying on base whose loved ones are in the Walter Reed Hospital receiving help with war injuries. We spent the morning on base helping with preparing dressing and cooking turkeys and then got in a few visits before helping transport food to the Recreation Center on base. We thought that we would feed over a hundred people based on what the chaplain told us but we had a very small response to our ward's invitation. I think we probably only fed about 25. As you can imagine, that meant that we had a huge amount of food left over. Fortunately, someone brought doggie bag containers and we loaded them up and took them to the guards at the various security gates, the people staying at the Fisher House (Ronald McDonald type home), and other groups who we thought would appreciate a nice turkey dinner. It was fun to be a part of it and we were able to get acquainted with several new sisters in the ward.

The next day we visited several of the young mothers on base and enjoyed that opportunity. It has been an interesting experience to rub shoulders with people involved in the military. It is something that I haven't been involved with or known much about. The base (which services the President of the United States) is very well maintained and the homes for the families are very nice. The members of the military from our ward are both men and women and they do a variety of jobs including being mechanics for the

airplanes, maintenance on the runways, drivers of military vehicles, and the list goes on and on.

There are also psychologists who work with soldiers or their families with anxiety issues or PTS from the battlefield. There are doctors and nurses and those assigned to both Air Force 1 and Air Force 2. Some of the wives don't really know what their husbands do since they are involved in classified operations but they learn to roll with whatever happens and usually they have very few days to adjust to the new assignments that come down from the top.

Many of the young families on base have husbands presently serving in Afghanistan and they handle the family scene alone for six, 12, or 18 months. Of course, this is a terrific challenge, especially since most of these sisters are fairly young, having their babies and away from their own families back home.

Our weather here is still quite warm and nice. Today we took our p-day and drove to the Chesapeake Bay and picked up some things that Sister Brown ordered for Christmas. It was a sunny and beautiful day and as we drove along a narrow road to visit one of the homes that fronts on the Bay, we couldn't help but imagine how fortunate the North Shore residents were in that Hurricane Sandy totally missed them and waited until New Jersey and New York to let loose her fury!

In 2006 Hurricane Isabel devastated the shoreline and many of the homes had to be rebuilt. Just imagine how pricey the property is right there next to the Bay. If all you had was a tent it would still be worth a lot. I've loved seeing this part of the world! It’s beautiful!

(Sunday night) We've had a great Sabbath! We started off early and left about eight for a missionary coordination meeting with the missionaries in the Capitol Ward. Following that we attended choir practice and polished off a song that we sung in sacrament meeting, "For The Beauty of the Earth". We attended our block of meetings and enjoyed them all. I had packed a lunch for us and after our meetings we drove to the Visitor's Center and ate our lunch and then visited with the missionaries serving there. The Center remodel is nearing completion and Christmas trees are being set up in the large foyer--one from each stake in the temple region. They are beautiful! On November 30th there will be a lighting ceremony when all 600,000 lights on the temple grounds will be turned on! Then starting December 1st there will be guest musical performances (one or two a night) and we will help usher about 90,000 guests through the Center and into the performance halls for the productions. The whole month is a gala affair.

After we visited with the other missionaries, we walked over to the temple for a special Christmas devotional for all temple workers and their endowed spouses or family members. The Washington D.C. Temple has seven stories and the whole top story is a gigantic assembly room with podiums on either end like the Kirkland and Nauvoo Temples. There is room for about 2-3,000 people to assemble and there are choir seats for about a hundred-voice choir. The Washington Mormon Choir performed the music for the fireside and it was heavenly! The speakers were so inspirational and I sat enthralled with the entire event. It truly felt like a bit of heaven.

One of the speakers was a member of the Seventy, Brother Lansing. He is newly called and told of how one of the new things that we are going to hear more and more about is how we are not to just attend the temple but we are to prepare our family names and make that a part of our lives. He said that when he was given his Seventy assignment, he was given a stake conference in Lansing Michigan. He wondered if that Lansing was in any way related to his Lansing heritage and so he and his wife and family began searching for connections. They discovered some interesting things.

Remember that Brother Lansing is only a second generation Mormon. His parents joined the Church when he was a young man so this story takes on all the more interest. In his searching he discovered that his ancestors came from Holland and settled somewhere around Chicago. His relative earned a law degree and started up a law firm and was very prosperous and successful. He dealt with business law and one of his clients was Joseph Smith who needed a copyright for his manuscript for the Book of Mormon!

Another of his relatives owned a farm around Kirtland and was approached by the Church about quarrying the stone for the Kirtland Temple from the quarry on his farm. He agreed. With things developing the way they did with the Saints and persecution, this man never did receive payment for the stones for the temple. In his diary he tells about the day the Kirtland Temple was dedicated and that several of them in the surrounding vicinity thought that they heard angels singing.

I loved hearing these stories! I thrill at how Family History work is coming to life in the Church! I've had an interesting thing come about because of my family history work.

Recently I noticed that one of the descendants of Grandma Gooch's first husband, Charles Burrell Kendrick, has an interesting story. Charles has a sister who married and they had about 10 children. In my research I found that one of the sons hadn't had his temple work done although it appeared that all of the other children had. The more I researched it the more I wondered why. Then one day while I was at the library, I discovered that this son had spent time in prison. He was recorded in the U.S. Census for Texas as being in a particular cell block. I then found him twenty years later living in California and married. Although he was a candidate for temple work I felt that the Kendrick's should have the first opportunity to do the work so I called my sister Kathy and she reached my cousin for me and last week she called me and said that they wanted to do the work. They were aware of this member of the family and knew that he had been omitted although they didn't tell me why and I didn't ask. That is just one of many interesting things I am learning about as I do my family history and it has been rewarding to see that although there has been a lot done, there is still work to do and I can have a part in it.

December 2, 2012

About three weeks ago Sister Brown and I got our flu shots. We were a little hesitant because the stake Relief Society president's son was hospitalized shortly after getting his and he nearly died before they got him stabilized But, the advice for seniors is to get a yearly flu immunization so we went ahead. About two weeks later Sister Brown's arm started aching and she has had a lot of grief with it ever since. She was in so much pain that she stayed home for two days this week. Although I was on my own, the days were Sunday and Wednesday, (our temple day) so it wasn't as hard for me to fly solo as it would have been if she had been sick on a visiting day. She has applied heat patches, slept with a heating pad, and tried a combination of pain killers, all to no avail. It's been pretty frustrating for her but it hasn't affected our work too much since a lot of what we do is done on the phone and computer.

This week someone loaned us a three-foot artificial Christmas tree. Sister Brown had some decorations from last year and someone else brought over a box full of odds and ends. Last night we trimmed the tree, replaced our one Thanksgiving centerpiece with a Christmas one, and hung an Advent Calendar that Sis Brown's daughter sent. We feel like we're ready for the holidays now and our little apartment looks festive with the lights on the tree casting a wonderful holiday glow.

Our activation work moves forward, sometimes as a snail's pace. Most women out here who don't have small children work full-time and catching them home is a trick. We can't be out after dark, if possible, which is both a safety precaution and just common sense. Finding the numbers on the front of a house in an unfamiliar neighborhood after dark is quite a trick and we learned a long time ago that it's not worth our time and energy. Another challenge is that if we wait until five to head home, the traffic is so bad that it's nearly bumper to bumper and again, not worth our time. So we really only have about five good hours each day when we can be out and about.

Sometimes it gets pretty discouraging and then we'll find a sister home and she is sweet and happy to see us and we leave after a great visit, smiling ear to ear. Invariably we have found that whether the sister is black or white, rich or poor, intelligent or struggling with limitations, we feel the Savior's love for her and marvel at her faith and determination to move forward against sometimes amazing odds.

Let me describe some things that we come in contact with out here that aren't so prevalent in the West. One way the families out here survive financially is by pooling their resources. It is not at all uncommon for grandparents to live with their married children and babysit the grandchildren while mom and dad both work. Another thing we have found is that people will simply rent a room instead of paying for an entire apartment. They may do this if they are the only family member in the States and are trying to get a financial foothold before bringing the rest of the family to the U.S.

A lot of families live in row houses which are usually three stories with a very small frontage but that are deep and tall. These condo or row houses give the feeling of individual dwellings but are just a glorified apartment with everyone having an entrance on the ground level. It is not at all uncommon for us to find that a sister lives in a very nice neighborhood with posh looking houses

and then as we knock on the front door, we discover that the sister lives around back in the basement or in a single room, sharing the living quarters with others doing the same. We pull up to the house and there are four or five vehicles parked in front and we think for sure the sister is going to be home. She isn't and each time we go we visit with another member of the extended family who shares in the living quarters.

Whenever I think about these living arrangements and how grateful I am to have had a home for my immediate family I remind myself that most of these people have very small families, maybe one or two children so it isn't quite the same as combining families that have several children.

Another common thing is that the women having the babies are not married and so they live with their Mom, she babysits. and they go out and earn a living. I have seen large families in a single dwelling with three or four unmarried women who each have several children and they are living together. The men of these families are here, there, and everywhere, and seldom do much to add value either at home or in the marketplace. It is very common for a man to charm a woman into marrying him and once the ceremony is over, he expects her to be the breadwinner while he does very little or nothing towards the support of her or the children. Sometimes it really gets to me and I want to wring a few necks but I realize that this is a cultural thing that has been going on for generations.

When I worked in the Silver Spring area, I saw these kinds of scenarios so often that I often wondered if it could ever be different. But, being a part of the Church here in Southern Maryland, I have seen that if families truly embrace the gospel, over generations those cultural patterns are modified and in time are nearly gone. That has been encouraging.

Last week our Gospel Essentials lesson was on "work". It became very obvious early on in the lesson that when the teacher and class members talked about work they assumed it referred to a job or career. I could expect this attitude in a male dominated class but this group was largely females and yet to them the discussion was about their day jobs. For a woman to devote herself to homemaking and family is foreign to them. They feel like it is a step backwards and since most of them are the breadwinners, that kind of a lifestyle just hasn't been a possibility for them anyway.

Well, I need to quit and prepare for the First Presidency's Christmas Devotional. Tomorrow we will be going to the Visitor's Center for a Jenny Oaks Baker concert and throughout the month we will have the opportunity to attend several of the wonderful Christmas musical programs that are on the agenda. The temple grounds are ablaze with 600,000 lights on trees and bushes and each of 12 stakes in the area have decorated individual trees that are displayed in the lobby of the V.C. There is a creche display of nativities from all over the world and the newly remodeled Visitor's Center is happy to pull in the 90,000 visitors from the area. We have brochures that we are giving out advertising all the concerts and other features and it's been really fun to talk with people on the street and invite them to something that is entertaining, uplifting, and FREE! Many make their attendance an annual thing and it is a wonderful missionary tool for those who serve here. Hope that all of you are finding time for all those fun holiday events and that you have enough time and energy to pause and think about the Savior and his gift to each of us. It's a great time to be in the mission field and I'm so grateful that I am here.

December 9, 2012

Congratulations to Paul and Jenny and new baby Amelia! Hopefully you siblings got the cute video that they produced showing Amelia as the nurses got her cleaned up and dressed in her nightie and stocking cap and the visit of the siblings to the hospital the next morning. It was sweet to be a part of this blessed event through the miracle of technology but I would have loved to have been there in person. Paul is taking some vacation time and helping out and Jenny's mom is going to fly out in January and will help then. I'm sure her parents are very, very involved right now with all the details of leaving house and home for three years to serve as mission president.

Today Sister Brown's back is bothering her so I am spending the day with the stake Relief Society president and we are visiting two inner city wards--Anacostia and Capitol Hill. Starting in January we will be assigned these two wards to finish out our rotation. We're disappointed that we can't visit the sisters during the week since both areas are deemed too dangerous. So....we will attend the meetings on Sunday but our ministering on the weekdays will be with phone calls. The Anacostia Ward is nearly all black and many of them are new to the church. It is so sweet to see how these people are trying so hard to become saints and

are fulfilling assignments and callings. They really put their hearts into it and it is very touching to see.

In one of the meetings a new convert gave the opening prayer and she said, "And thank you, Lord, for waking us up this morning so we could be here today and for us waking up in our right minds!" It struck me funny but I kept myself under control, although I did have a big smile on my face. Later I got to thinking that based on what problems that convert had prior to baptism, maybe there were some mornings when she didn't wake up in her right mind.

It was fun to see some of the other senior missionaries interact with the ward members. The two senior couples who attend that ward serve there for 18 months so they really bond. There are two senior couples, four Elder companionships, and then Sis Brown and me who will be serving there in January.

Although most of the membership arrived late, they did arrive and before the meeting was over the whole chapel was full. There was a great feeling of camaraderie among the members and all different nationalities and cultures. One thing about the black women: they are not shy and they tell it like it is. It's rather refreshing to see such openness although sometimes it catches me off guard, such as when they all say "Bless you" right out loud when someone sneezes during the meeting.

One comment today helped me understand their culture better. We were discussing teaching children the gospel and studying a talk by George Albert Smith wherein he says that we cannot push the teaching of our children off on the schools or other groups. One sister who was dressed in traditional African dress said, "In Africa a whole community raises the children. When a child is out in public doing something wrong, everyone has a responsibility to correct them and tell them to stop. Then you go home and call that child's parents and tell them what their child was doing so they can discipline them when they get home. That way everyone knows that everyone else is keeping an eye out for the children in the community." She said that doesn't work here in America but it is what they do in Africa.

One interesting experience: the woman sitting behind me had a beautiful soprano voice and so after the meeting I turned around and told her how good it felt to sing alto with such a voice behind me. She was a woman about my age and noticeably wealthy. She said that she was visiting her son's family who are in the Capital Hill Ward. When she saw my name tag she commented that she and her husband had served as mission presidents for three years. When she learned I was from Idaho she said that her father, Ezra Taft Benson, was buried in Whitney, Idaho! Well, that gave me a chance to mention Bonnie's grandfather Orville Benson, who is a brother to President Benson. I even told them that Bonnie and Steve had visited the home in Whitney and been in the big barn on the property.

This lady said that her father wanted to be buried in Whitney and told President McKay his desires so that they would be followed. I still can't figure out why President McKay since he was older than President Benson I believe. I guess President Benson and the Prophet Joseph are the only two presidents not buried in Utah.

We've had a lot of sadness here this week. Sister Brown's arm has been so sore that she finally went to the doctor and found out that she has tendonitis. She was given some meds and told to take it easy for a while and give it a chance to heal. She was grateful to finally know what she was dealing with but doesn't really know how she has injured it. We suspect it is by carrying her heavy bags and purse.

Then Tuesday afternoon she received word that her nephew from Denver who was a drug addict committed suicide. This was such sad news but made even more tender for Sister Brown since she had a daughter, Cassie, who was a drug addict and who was in rehab for several months to get back on track. It was about a $50,000 program and really was a hardship for them but it did help. Well, Cassie has been close to this nephew and he was also quite close to Sister Brown’s deceased husband, Ron, since Ron knew what Cassie had been through and could empathize with the nephews plight.

When the phone call came about the suicide, Sister Brown about fell apart. Then she was on the phone nonstop for hours, talking to the extended family, trying to get a flight to Denver, talking her daughter through the whole thing, and trying to keep herself together. One thing that added to the drama was that many of the extended family would say things like, "Now we know why Ron died. He was needed on the other side to help the nephew." Well, these people meant well but this was very upsetting to Sister

Brown that they thought the Lord would take Ron from his own family to help a nephew and every time someone said it, she would cry some more. She was pretty emotionally trashed all week. President Matsumori gave her permission to leave the mission to go to the funeral but flight tickets were coming in at around $7-800 and she wasn't sure she could get all the logistics worked out anyway. She was also worried that she would be so emotional at the funeral that she wouldn't be able to function and would be more trouble than help to the distraught

family. By Thursday night she was a wreck and I didn't know what to say or do to help her.

Fortunately, about 8:30 the Elders dropped in to check on us and I asked them if they would consider giving Sister Brown a blessing. The new Elder in the area is from Hungary and when he went to pronounce the blessing he was trying to remember how to start it in English and Sister Brown said, "Just give it in Hungarian." With that he started into his blessing in Hungarian and spoke with such sweetness and fluency that we were all touched.

Although we couldn't understand a word that he said, the Spirit was so strong. After the blessing Sister Brown asked him what he had said and he told her that the Lord wanted her to exercise faith in Jesus Christ and to lean on her testimony during this upsetting time. Soon thereafter they left and Sis Brown settled down and finally decided that she wouldn't go to the funeral but would go to visit the family enroute home from her mission in February. Once that decision was made, she settled down and was able to function.

In the midst of all this I have been trying to keep the visits going and have a relatively productive week. I've tried to be sympathetic but it seemed like if it wasn't one thing it was another. She spent the day home today with her back hurting but hopefully she will be ready to go to work tomorrow.

December 16, 2012

As most of you are aware, a gunman killed 20 young children in Connecticut on Friday and although we hadn't seen it on TV, some of Sister Brown's friends on Facebook let her know and we've heard bits and pieces about it all weekend. Many of the prayers in our meetings today mentioned the families and everyone's thoughts are on this tragedy and those affected. Seems especially sad at this time of year.

I felt badly when I learned that SaraKay's package had been pulled in Brazil and the postal authorities wanted her to pay a custom fine on it before releasing it. I called the mission office and the missionaries said that it is a random screening and about one package in five or six is pulled and custom fines attached. I told them to let SaraKay know to just pay the fine and get her Christmas. I don't know if she will but her whole Christmas was in that one box so hopefully she can get it worked out.

We've had a week full of wonderful experiences. We finally caught up with some families who we have been trying to get in to see for several weeks. One family in particular we have been working with for as long as we have been in this ward. We first met them when they were moving in. We called to get an appointment and discovered that they were in the process of relocating and the new address was in our ward boundaries. We offered our help, it was accepted, and we arrived a while later with cleaning supplies in hand. The four full-time Elders also showed up with several ward members and with us all working together we were able to make a huge difference in the work load for them. Of course, later as we left, we reminded them of our ward's meeting schedule and said that we'd hope to see them at Church. Well, weeks passed and no Arroyo family. Sister Brown and I frequently dropped by but finding them home was difficult and no one in the ward had a current phone number for them.

On Monday, after making several visits in the area, I commented to Sister Brown that I thought we should drop in again. It was about four in the afternoon and we knew that Luis drove their son, Mason, home from school at three so we thought we would at least catch him and the kids. We had found him once before at home with the kids and we had taken time to give the kids some big hugs and talked with them about Primary and all the fun they would have if they came (wasn't that underhanded of us!) and we also had some treats for them so we were a big hit.

Last Monday when we arrived the whole family was there, especially the mother who is the key figure in this process of activation. She answered the door and warmly welcomed us in and then the fun began. All four little ones, (Mason, 9) Seth and Sarah (4) and Amelia (2) came running and jumped into our arms and gave us big hugs and asked about Primary and made a huge fuss over us. We gave the family the pecan

log we brought and Luis seemed especially pleased with that. Krystal, the mother, just stood and looked on and appeared a little taken aback at the response from the children. We had a short but sweet visit, committed them to attend the ward party on Saturday, and then we headed home. I imagine the Arroyo's weren't looking out the window as we left their residence but if they were they would see two senior sister missionaries jump in the air and click their heels together!!!! Yes, and besides that we got two cell phone numbers and one home phone number to share with the other Elders and ward council members.

We had a half mission conference on Thursday with Allan Packer and his wife as the visiting authorities. It was an all-day affair and wonderful time together. Any time the missionaries gather it is a great time. Lots of laughing, talking, and renewing acquaintances with old companions and usually good food, too, thanks to the dedicated ward Relief Societies who provide us with lunch. Elder Packer talked about him and his wife's time as mission presidents and of the importance of obedience to mission rules.

Sister Packer talked about keeping apartments clean, being in on time each evening, and being exact in their obedience. Elder Packer also spoke about the upcoming months and the influx of new missionaries that we will see. He talked about the importance of everyone stepping up their performance and of the hastening of the work. He also encouraged us to live so that the Spirit can always be with us and said that in his calling he has to be in a reverential attitude 24/7 and can't "take on and off" his mantle of the priesthood but needs to have it ever abide with him.

On Friday we drove to the Visitor's Center to work a shift. Before going to the visitor's center, we made some visits in an area of our ward that we thought we could easily visit en route to our evening assignment. We had had such a short week with other commitments that I was trying to squeeze in a few more visits.

We took our dressier clothes in the car and left home about 1:30 for Temple Hills and our appointment. When we arrived at the appointed hour the sister wasn't there. We were, of course, disappointed. I thought that we should drop by some of the other sisters in the area but Sister Brown felt differently so I turned on the first exit pointing to Washington D.C. north and we were on our way.

Following the GPS we soon found ourselves driving along streets that were totally foreign to us and it soon became obvious that we were in the inner city. Traffic became horrendous, streets were narrow, and the further we followed the GPS the more difficult the driving became. Then we finally saw something familiar....the Visitor's Center or temple? No, the Washington Monument, the Tidal Basin, and the U.S. Capital Building!!!

How in tarnation did two small town senior citizen's end up driving in downtown D.C. at rush hour!!!And me at the wheel!!!Well, we kept driving, trying to follow the GPS (cursed thing!) and every time we'd misunderstand the directions, we were off on another side street. What should have taken us 20 minutes took us about an hour and a half of white-knuckle driving. I could feel the sweat rolling down my armpits and if there had been a way out, I would have thrown up my hands, abandoned the car, and walked to the Visitor's Center! But there wasn't anything to do but to keep driving.

When we got into the round-about called Dupont Circle we found the right street, exited, and drove the rest of the way on Connecticut Avenue until we finally arrived in Kensington. What an ordeal! We were both so trashed that we considered telling the Visitor Center director that we couldn't possibly play host to the world's people's that night but duty prevailed and we changed our clothes and took our assigned places for the evening. And what an amazing evening it was!!!People came from all over the area to see the lights around the temple and to enjoy the free musical program. Old and young, from all economic backgrounds and cultures filed through the Center all evening. An all black "Singing Sensations" choir performed in the auditorium. They were "at-risk" children from the slums of Baltimore and D.C. and were entertaining and wonderful!

I was positioned at the exit for the Nativity display of over 100 creches. My position by the exit gave me the opportunity to visit with people as they entered the humanitarian area of the Center. It was touching to see people quietly go through the interactive display area and to watch the young Sisters work the crowds, asking questions and requesting referrals.

I was positioned to keep visitors from entering the nativity area through the exit door and I explained to them to go around by the Christos and enter

there. One family that approached the door had a young man with them who was paper thin and pale and in a wheelchair. I told them that this door was the exit but I would make an exception for them. They entered and a while later came through my door again as they exited. They were talking about the visitor's center in Palmyra and I answered some questions for them. Then I asked about their time at the Church history sites and found out that their son (in the wheelchair) was missionary age but had cancer and was not able to serve a regular mission. He was presently serving in the Draper Temple but of late had been awarded a free trip with his family to the Church history sites as a Make A Wish Foundation recipient.

He had also been flown to Texas and spent time with Glenn Beck. Now their family was in Washington D.C. to see the sites and the entire trip was paid for by Jon Huntsman. They arrived in a stretch limo and were having a great trip. As we stood and visited I could see the tears glistening in the parent's eyes and I could only imagine the sorrow they were experiencing, knowing that their son was so ill and limited in what he could do.

After a short but sweet visit they moved on and I was left standing at the exit with my eyes glistening and my heart saddened for this family whose son was so deathly ill. I was reminded that life is full of the unexpected; that we need to be grateful for each sweet moment.

Tonight is the ward Christmas party. We have made lots of calls and done all we could to get the less-actives to come. I hope when they do come that we can recognize them and make them feel welcome. I'm way past the stage of thinking that all black people look alike, but sometimes when I have only met them through a screen door or through a crack in the partially opened door, it is quite difficult to identify them and put a name with the face. One thing that certainly adds to my consternation is the fact that many black women wear wigs. They have a variety of wigs, each styled differently and when they show up in some new-fangled hair style it's all I can do to recall just who it is I'm talking to.

(Sunday) We have had a great day! Last night at the party we had several families that we are working with show up and the ward members went out of their way to welcome them. It was a real payday for us and all our efforts. We helped with the set up and cooking for the meal and then served as well. I walked around with a pitcher full of punch and filled glasses. It was the perfect situation to work the crowds and meet many of the ward members who I haven't met yet. This ward is so diverse and such a big ward that the amount of work is limitless! I just hate moving on in two more weeks to two new wards. Seems like we are leaving a lot of unfinished business behind.

Its midnight and I need to get to bed. We took an investigator to the V.C. tonight and with traffic and picking her up and dropping her off we were gone a total of 7 hours. The distances out here and the traffic are such obstacles. I don't think that we will offer to take anyone else with us when we go. It is just too far, too long, and too expensive. Need to close and go to bed.

December 22, 2012

I received a sweet phone call last Monday from Carl Johnson who I knew from my childhood in Shelley. My parents moved from South Dakota to Shelley, Idaho (transferred with the Sugar Company) and we arrived in our new home on Christmas Eve. I was so worried that Santa wouldn't find us that year but he did and we enjoyed our first Christmas in Idaho.

The following Sunday we attended our new ward and the next week my dad was called to be a counselor in the bishopric to Maurice Johnson. Maurice had been a new bishop for about a week before we moved into the ward and had been unable to come up with a name as his other counselor and when our family walked into the Church that next Sunday, Maurice knew that Daddy was the man!

That occasion was the beginning of a close and wonderful friendship between our two families. I was best friends with the oldest daughter, Carolyn Johnson, and Carl was one of Nate's best friends. Carl has been living in North Dakota for several years and wanted to touch base with Nate and needed his contact information. Carl was delighted to know that Nate had also moved back into the area and said that he would love to get reacquainted.

Of course, as old friends do, Carl and I did some visiting and he told me that Grandpa Arch was one of his favorite people. He said that Daddy was firm but loving and that he really connected with people. Carl called him a man's man. He said that he really was good with the Aaronic priesthood youth and always made them feel like they were good kids and had bright futures. It was

sweet to hear those kind things about my Dad. I think that sometimes the impact of our influence doesn't manifest itself until those we touched grow old enough to appreciate just what we did.

(Saturday) I got a call last night from SaraKay arranging her Christmas phone call. She will be calling Christmas evening at five so from five to six I'll be involved but hopefully throughout the day I will hear from the rest of you. We have a great day planned. We have an all-mission conference starting at 9:00 at the Visitor's Center with pictures, a movie, and then dinner and a talent show. I think it is a perfect way to spend Christmas in the mission field since being with the others who are in like circumstances will help us all to not be homesick.

I'm sure you returned missionaries will agree that missionary work has its share of interesting moments. We had some this week. We went to visit a sister who we had an appointment with only to find that she wasn't home. We always leave a brochure and calling card when we drop by but during the month of December we also have left some candy wrapped festively as a gift for those sisters we visit. This sister had a metal mailbox which was attached to the front of the house by the front door. She also had a clothes pin fastened on the mailbox and I attached the Christmas candy plus the brochure in case we didn't make it back before Christmas. The candy was wrapped in soft white netting and tied with a red and green ribbon with a jingle bell attached.

Well, this particular day there were two girls playing in a yard a few houses away who seemed interested in what we were doing. I had some taffy kisses that I carry in my coat pocket for just such occasions and I called to them and gave them each some candy and a mormon.org card. They were very appreciative and then went about their playing. We didn't think much about it until we dropped by again to visit Gloria. I had forgotten that we had already left a favor on her mailbox so I retrieved one from my bag and gave it to her. She looked at it kind of funny and then said, "This is interesting. When I came home yesterday from work there was this ribbon and the bell laying on my front door step. I didn't know where they came from. Now I know." We confirmed that we had left the candy favor on the mailbox the day before and Gloria commented that apparently someone took the favor, ate the candy, and left the empty fabric, ribbon, and bell laying on the doorstep. She said that it wasn't the first time she had had neighbors steal from her but it reminded us that we need to be careful not to leave things out in the open.

Another house we visited was ramshackle and so we were stepping lightly as we made our way through a maze of things in the yard and on the front porch. Doing our visiting often puts us in strange neighborhoods and in less-than-ideal situations. I typically wear a skirt and blouse and flats so I can get around with ease since we are in and out of the car, up and down streets and stairs, and often, if we do get in, sitting in the middle of a mess. One time I had so much dog hair on my coat and skirt that I thought I wasn't going to be able to wear them again.

Although I have gone with the flow and dressed down for the conditions under which we serve, Sister Brown is very glamorous with a cute modern hair style, the latest fashion in eyewear, a coat for every occasion, and always....always in high topped high heeled fashion boots. I have told her that I worry that she is going to take a spill sometime but she laughs at me and I laugh at her and we move forward being ourselves.

Well on this particular visit it was a little like an obstacle course just getting into the yard but since we didn't see any "Beware of Dog" signs and also no "No Trespassing" signs we unlocked the gate to the driveway which was secured with bungy cords, and walked gingerly to the front porch, avoiding the mess and tree roots and ripped up carpet on the stairs.

As we suspected there wasn't anyone home but we left our calling cards and the Christmas favor and made our way back to the car. As we were stepping onto the blacktop on the driveway Sister Brown started to teeter. At first, I thought she was being funny because the blacktop was so bumpy and pitted that it was like a washboard. Then I realized that she really was in trouble and she picked up momentum, moving almost at the speed of light as she tried to keep her balance in her high heeled boots on the steeply sloping driveway.

Fortunately, by the time she reached the open gate at the bottom of the slope she had nearly regained her balance and grabbed the wire gate to avoid a tumble. When we both knew that she was okay we started laughing about her wild ride down the driveway. We laughed all the way to the car and sat there still laughing about what a funny sight we two were, tiptoeing through the tulips!

I'm grateful that I have a companion who makes me laugh. When I served in the Family History Library and drove back and forth every morning and evening with Sharon Moss, we started laughing when she got in the car and thoroughly enjoyed our trips together. Finding humor in life makes it easier to grow old.

Yesterday we went with two senior couples to D.C. to tour the White House. During the Christmas season it is permissible to take pictures inside and I took a lot of them. I had never seen such beautiful floral arrangements and Christmas trees. There was at least one tree in every room decorated beyond description! It was elegance like I have seldom seen and I couldn't help thinking that we had gone in our travels this week from the ridiculous to the sublime.

I thought at how much nicer it will be when the Savior reigns and every home will have a Christmas tree with presents under it and food fit for the season. In one home we visited there wasn't a single item that spoke of Christmas time or of the Nativity. I know the children in that home know that it's Christmas but have no expectations regarding it. We hope to bring a little cheer to a pretty dismal situation and we have some things planned. I'm always pleased when I hear of projects that your families are doing to spread the Christmas spirit.

I'm so grateful for this opportunity to serve a mission. I've been thinking of home and missing each of you. I attended an orchestra concert at the V.C. this past week and the music of the season evoked feelings that were truly bitter/sweet-- memories of Dad and of Christmas's past and of good times and bad-- of struggling to come up with the funds to afford it; of hiding gifts at Grandma Barbara's; and of kids coming through the front door from college and into a home smelling of broccoli soup and homemade rolls. Memories of hunting for just the right Christmas tree and of the smell of pine and of the warmth generated by the wood burning stove. Memories of phone calls from missionaries, of game night, of way too many treats (Jelly Belly's) and of the doorbell ringing with greetings from sweet friends and family. President Monson was right when he said that Christmas is a time of poignant memories.

Know that I know with a greater certainty than ever before that the Savior lives, He loves us, and He will support us in the best of times and the worst of times. I know that 2012 saw many tender mercies for the Stephen A. Larsen family and that we have been richly blessed and guided in our lives. How grateful I am for each of you and your wonderful influence in my life. Have a truly Merry Christmas! Love to all. Mom

December 30, 2012

We've had a very relaxing holiday week. Sister Brown's daughter, Emily, arrived Thursday and will be leaving early tomorrow morning, flying out for Utah. Christmas day was one of the sweetest days of my mission experience. All the missionaries, young and old, gathered at the Visitor's Center for an all-mission conference and party. It is always so fun to gather with the other missionaries, especially with the senior couples. This mission has an abundance of couples which makes it all the more fun. There are four V.C. couples, six archive couples, two auxiliary training companionships, two office couples, two counselors and wives who serve with President and Sister Matsumori, nine member support couples, and one employment specialist couple and one CES couple. This list doesn't even include all the temple missionaries who we tour with and who help out at the V.C. when there is a need. Just imagine how fun it is to get acquainted with all of these people. We're truly like family since none of us have our families out here. The young missionaries are also dear to us. We get acquainted with them as they move in and out of our areas of service and they are quick to bond and form wonderful friendships.

This conference was the last time that several of us will be together. Some of the senior couples have completed their time and will soon be leaving for home. Our V.C. director and his wife are leaving mid-January along with two other V.C. couples and several archive missionaries will be finishing up in mid-April. I'm beginning to feel like an old timer. Sis Brown and Harper leave mid-February and this Wednesday we have several young sister missionaries who are heading home. It makes for a very emotional time with all the hugs and good-byes. Despite the difficulties of a mission, there is no mistaking the camaraderie that is so much a part of the experience.

The agenda on Christmas was for a general meeting, remarks by the departing V.C. director and his wife, and then remarks from President Matsumori and his wife. It was a spiritual feast and emotional. Following their talks President Matsumori announced that we would watch a

mission-appropriate movie. This movie had been speculated on for several weeks since it is one of two movies the young missionaries get to see the whole two years of their mission. Last year it was the newest version of KungFu Panda and word on the street was that someone in Australia had gotten the copy of it out of China before it was released in the United States and sent it to the Matsumori's just for our Christmas conference. So, excitement was high this year that maybe the President had worked his magic another year and we would see some never-before-seen movie in the USA! No such luck. I had to laugh when President Matsumori announced that the movie was "Elf". And then in a rather apologetic tone he said, "I hope you'll enjoy it". And then in a rather straight forward tone he added, "and if you don't, tough!" He's also getting near the end of his time and it's fun to see him relaxing a bit in regards to pleasing everyone!

Following the movie, we had a delicious grilled turkey dinner! A man in the area who purchased a large grill from the Amish, has done this service for the mission for several years. The grill holds eight large turkeys on spit racks and oh, are they delicious! I volunteered to help in the kitchen with carving the turkeys along with several missionary couples. It was a labor of love and lots of fun.

As we enjoyed our meal, each zone presented a talent number and then Santa visited with candy canes for everyone. Earlier the Matsumori's presented us each with a gospel art book and a leather-bound journal for their gift. As you can imagine spirits were high and "a good time was had by all". As usual, when the appointed hour arrived for the event to be over President said his usual speech, "Okay, we've had a wonderful time now go home and get to work!" No loitering!" (The energy level of 150 young Elders and Sisters is unbelievable and difficult to harness if they have too long away from the yoke of their responsibilities.)

The rest of my day was spent with phone calls to each of you kids. I had visited with John and Becky and their families the day before so it made for a wonderful time. I nearly missed my scheduled call from SaraKay, though. She had been in such a hurry when she scheduled the call that we failed to designate how we would reach each other. I assumed that I would return her call on the number she called me on the day before (a local pay phone) but she was waiting on Skype for me to log on. Thank goodness I didn't wait all night before I thought to check my email and there was a message, "Mom, where are you?" Well, thankfully we connected and had a wonderful visit.

We spent quite a bit of time talking through her release day and plans for the future. We talked about companions, about Zac (who has a girlfriend), about her friends back home, and I filled her in on her siblings. She talked about some of the people she is working with and some of the problems she deals with daily.

Right now is the Brazilian summer and the heat is so oppressive. There is little relief in the homes they visit because there isn't air conditioning and walking the streets and getting to appointments in the heat makes the sweat just run off of them. She said that she has never experienced anything like it. Even the nights are sweltering! She is really going to appreciate our wonderful breezy summer days and cool nights in Idaho like never before when she returns home.

On Wednesday and Thursday I caught up on some book work that I've been putting off and worked for a while on my scrapbook. I've had to change my prescription coverage since coming to Maryland since Humana doesn't service this area and you would think that I was making some major financial transaction by the phone calls and the paper work that I've received in regards to this one change. If the rain forests of South America get destroyed by the paper companies we can place the blame on Medicare. The volumes of paper I receive from them is unbelievable! Anyway, it felt good to kick back for a couple days and not worry about scheduling.

On Friday we rode the Metro into D.C. and took a double-decker tour bus around to see the sights. It cost us each $40 for the day but we were able to cover the main attractions and then catch the bus to the next stop. Emily thought this might be her only shot at seeing D.C. so we tried to pack it all into one busy day. It was cold but sunny and we all wore multiple layers and kept warm. I was surprised at the crowds everywhere. Every monument, every museum, the Capitol building.....all were packed with tourists. Even the buses were congested. One time there were so many people on the bus that there was standing room only and we laughed when the recorded tour narration told us to look left or right to see some landmark and we couldn't see anything but other people's coats, arms, bags, and faces. Luckily everyone was in a festive mood and just rolled with the situation. We finally

caught the metro about eight that night and arrived home bone weary and exhausted.

On Saturday we went to see Les Miserables and that night to the V.C. to see a jazz trio which included the bishop and member of one of the wards we service. The V.C. was ablaze with lights and packed with people! What fun to mix and mingle, enjoy a quality performance, and again walk on the temple grounds, showing Emily around. Today we spoke in sacrament meeting and said our good-byes since we will start in Anacostia next Sunday. It is going to be a difficult rotation. It's far from ideal but what we have been asked to do.

I'm going to close and get to bed. Although tomorrow is New Year's Eve, I'm hoping to be able to get back into the work once we get Emily on her way. The weather has been cold but pleasant and not much snow or bad roads to speak of. I hear that the West is getting the moisture its needed. I think about my home and hope that all is well there. SaraKay's release date is June 18th so I suspect I will come home a little before that. I'm wondering if Laurel and Josh will be leaving before I arrive. I know they both have their papers submitted or are finishing that up before they head back to the Y. Rachel is packed and ready for BYU-I.

Seems like a long time coming and she's counting down the days.

I appreciated all the Christmas calls, gifts, and cards. I was happy to report to SaraKay, "All's quiet on the home front". Although that is far from the truth if we speak literally of all the households and the flurry of activities that go on, I am so grateful that each of you are doing well and finding joy in the journey! Love to all. Mom

2013

January 5, 2013

I received word last night that Brent Young passed away from a heart attack on Thursday. Melanie said that he was shoveling snow and was found face down in a snow drift, dead. Tough for Shelli and the three daughters. I don't know if any of you were close to any of his daughters but if so a card could be sent to Shelli Young P.O Box 5 Moreland Idaho 83256. I am going to send some money and a card. When Daddy passed away they provided a delicious cooked roast that went a long way towards feeding the family at the dinner. I don't know if they are going to have the ward help out with the funeral or not but Melanie said that when she made a visit the house was full of company and there was lots of food so I know that the good friends and neighbors are rallying. Bruce Ellis has been especially close to Brent. Since being on my mission there have been three new widows in our ward: Shelli Young, Rosemary Harding, and Deniece Chadwick.

Before I left on my mission, they brought me a gift and I've received letters from Shelli so even though they don't subscribe to the church and its doctrines, they are very supportive and Brent has helped me around the yard when I've needed him. He will certainly be missed!

We've had car problems this past week and spent two days tethered to our apartment. It's been a bit frustrating but I've found that on these occasions I just get on the phone and start calling all of our contacts and using my time that way. We have really grown to love the sisters in the Capitol Ward! I've decided that there are wonderful people everywhere in the church. This ward is no exception.

Someone asked me the other day how my mission has changed me. I think one way is that I am bolder about approaching people about the gospel, especially those who have been baptized and made that commitment. So many of these individuals have slipped away and some are just waiting for an invitation to return whereas others for whatever reason have become belligerent and bitter. I think the Lord has blessed us to be able to quite quickly determine if a sister is in a state of readiness and when we are to persist and be patient and when we are to move on and not waste time.

We have a sister who we continue to try to get a phone number for. When I caught her three children home, they gave me her phone number but I quickly discovered that it was her work phone at the VA Hospital kitchen and that although her children used that number, she wouldn't take calls from unknowns on it. So yesterday we dropped by to set up an appointment with her. We know that she works evenings so the best time to catch her is usually during the day. We knocked on the door and a window upstairs opened and someone yelled,

(Her) "Who is it?"

(Us) "The sister missionaries."

(Her) What do you want?

(Us) "To visit with Sherrilyn."

(Her)....after a long pause...."She isn't here".

(Us)"We think you are her". Window closes. After this last comment Sister Brown starts to chuckle and heads for the car. I'm on my own. I knock again but she never comes to the door. I write a note asking her to please call us and let us set up an appointment at her convenience.

Since first meeting Sherrilyn I have definitely felt that this lady and her three sweet children, ages 8, 12, and 16, need the gospel in their lives and because of this I am willing to continue with this situation, hoping and praying for a softening of her heart. I don't know what has happened or the history of her and the Church but she is on our ward roster and I know the Lord loves her and wants her to be active.

Sometimes when we have been persistent a sister will begin to feel sorry for us and will agree to meet with us out of pity. That's okay, too. After all we are senior sisters, away from all we hold dear, and in a strange area trying to locate the lost sheep. (We play that for all it's worth.) One sister said that her children were tired of our efforts to contact her and insisted that she call us and meet with us. When we met, we found her to be a kindred spirit. Although she doesn't come to church, she has invited us back and seems to enjoy our visits.

I read something the other day that is going to change the way I do business. It was a chapter in Elder Oaks' book "Life's Lessons Learned." He talked about visiting a conference shortly after his wife, June, died. There was in the audience a young woman who was investigating the church. Before the meeting, Elder Oaks likes to shake

hands and visit with members of the congregation and he did that this particular day.

Later he visited with this young sister and learned that she couldn't particularly remember what his talk had been about but she had been so impressed with his demeanor and sincerity that she had agreed to join the church. Elder Oak's conclusion was that "it is in our personal interactions with one another that we are most likely to find the influence and transforming power of the Spirit." I keep thinking about that. Usually when we make our visits, we present some sort of mini lesson or give a spiritual thought. For those who we are just meeting we try to spend our first visit getting acquainted.

Now these visits mean more to me than previously since reading President Oak's book. Even just meeting and greeting these sisters can bear witness to them that what we are saying is true and that we truly represent Jesus Christ. This has the potential to have a transforming power upon them if we are living worthy of the Spirit.

Yesterday we had an appointment with a woman who is struggling with major health issues. A black fellow who was sitting on his porch next door greeted us as we approached Emily's door. He was bundled in a warm outfit and had a bottle in a bag that he was drinking from. It looked like the bottles that alcoholics carry around in the movies. We said hello and then went inside for our visit with Emily. When we completed our visit, we again greeted him. As I approached the car, I decided that since he had time to sit in the sun that maybe he would have time to read. We always carry pamphlets and books with us and I took a Book of Mormon and walked over to him and I told him that we were missionaries out doing our visits and that I wanted to share this book with him. I placed it on the bench at his side. I couldn't help noticing that he was covered with open sores and red-eyed. He looked at me and said, "Well, thank you."

As we drove away, he was fingering the book and looked up and waved at us. Now, thinking back on that experience, I wish that I had born witness to him of its truthfulness. I think I didn't because we are set apart to teach the sisters and we are pretty careful about getting into any situation that could be dangerous so I just did it quickly yet kindly.

Of course, now I'm going to call the Elders and have them drop by. Sometimes when I've had an interaction with someone who isn't long for this world, I wonder if Dad and I are playing "hand-off" with each other. I suspect that Daddy may have an opportunity to teach Brent Young the gospel. He and Brent had a good relationship and I think Dad would like that.

One thing that has helped me avoid discouragement on my mission is the understanding that life goes on beyond the grave. Some of these people we teach are so damaged that I don't know if things will ever be right with them in this life. Everything in their crazy mixed-up lives is out of whack. Some have come from such bad situations that emotionally they are almost beyond repair. I know the Atonement works but they won't access it or can't because their lives are a mess. When we see these situations, we do the best we can to teach them the principles of the gospel and trust that they will get continuing help beyond the grave.

I think part of the purpose of my mission is to reach out to these people and reassure them that the Lord is aware of them and loves them. Hopefully even if they never fully embrace it here, they will go into eternity with the assurance that the Church tried to help them. I am confident that every kindness and good act that we do will have an influence on the hearts and minds of these sisters even if we don't see it right now. As for me, it is a joyous thing to know that I am representing the Savior and my acts bear witness of His love.

Of course, as missionaries, we really become a link between our contacts and the ward, helping them to reconcile if that is what is needed and then helping the sister network with V.T, home teachers, and the programs of the Church. Too many times these people we bring in need all kinds of services, including food, clothing, jobs, and health care. I always feel badly when we find someone who becomes a real drain on the resources of the ward but I know the Lord will bless and inspire his leaders to handle these situations with wisdom and love.

I have really felt since living in this area that the social and political problems we face as a nation are many and complex and I'm not sure how we are going to pull out of where we are. Knowing that ultimately the Savior will reign and that these issues will be solved in His way is a great comfort.

Best close. After visiting with Stephani and David I've learned that there are two mission calls that are expected within this next couple of weeks! Josh and Laurel.......how exciting! I hope

that Dave and some of his family will write up their experiences over the holiday building a home in Mexico for a Church member and his family and share that with us. Sounds like everyone had a wonderful holiday. And by the way…….good luck to Rachel who will be moving in at BYU-I this weekend! I still remember moving Steve and David to Ricks. All the way to Rexburg they were asking me about making bread, chili, and of course, gravy. I kept saying that they wouldn't have time to cook like I cooked at home, but they were pretty determined to keep their food budget to a minimum. Gotta love em! Mom

January 12, 2013

We've spent the day sight-seeing in Annapolis, Maryland's capital, and the home of the United States Naval Academy. I toured the area earlier in my mission with Sister Wege and the Dickies but Sister Brown had never been so we decided to make a day of it. The weather here is mildly cold but no snow, rain, or sleet and the roads are clear. But, the good weather draws the crowds and it was a very busy tourist day in Old Annapolis. The touristy part of town is nestled around the Academy so fortunately once we found a parking spot, we were able to walk to everywhere we were interested in seeing. The Academy is on the banks of the Severn River and the Chesapeake Bay. What a beautiful setting! Of course, all of this part of the country is laced with major rivers and "the Bay" is the centerpiece of all the recreation and much of the industry.

One of the things I have come to appreciate more since living here are the opportunities the nation's military offers to young men and women as an avenue for college and career. We serve sisters who work or whose husbands' work on the Andrews Air Force Base and the Bolling military facility. They seem to have a pretty good life style and good benefits, too. It was so fun to be around Annapolis today and see the cadets in their military dress. We were able to tour the National Maritime Museum on campus, the cathedral, visitor's center, as well as enjoy the local shops and atmosphere. It reminded me a lot of Jackson Hole. Sister Brown said that it reminded her of Park City. Except for the snow, of course.

We pick up the local Utah and Idaho weather reports on line and are following the forecasts. Sounds like both states are getting their share of snow this year. But, from what we have heard and read, they both need the moisture.

We've had a productive week of visits, working on family history, attending night Relief Society meetings, and meeting with another missionary couple to identify Anacostia sisters. We also made a quick trip to Kensington to say good-bye to the Larson's. They are from the Tri-Cities area in Washington State and arrived last January just a little after I did and have been dear friends. Their P-day was on Mondays so Sister Wege and I would take our P-day that same time and go touring with them. It gave us a break from each other and it was a lot more fun to join with the Larsons. We also could split the cost of the gas so it was a win-win situation for us all. Thank goodness I was in Silver Spring for nine months because being in Southern Maryland like I am now, it is a lot more difficult to get to the District and do the sight-seeing that we were able to do in Silver Spring. The Larson's left yesterday for home. I'm sure that some of these people I may never see again in this life but with e-mail, I suspect that many of us will keep track of each other, at least for a while.

The high spot of the week for me was a visit we had with a new sister we met on Thursday. We were going down the roster and making phone calls and she answered and agreed to let us visit. We arrived at a small frame home in Upper Marlboro and knocked repeatedly. We were about ready to give up and admit that we had been "dogged" when we heard someone yell that she was coming. She was a very tall, 60ish, black woman and her blind mother, was sitting nearby in an armchair. We were introduced to both of them and enjoyed a delightful time together. Carrie, the daughter, has been the primary caregiver for her mother, Carrie, for about the last five years and her mother likes to go to her church so Carrie takes her mother to her meetings and misses her own. She seemed to be thrilled to have us come by and even commented on the Ensign I was carrying, saying that she used to get a subscription to that magazine but hadn't of late. We asked if she would like to go to stake conference with us on the 20th and she said that if she could find someone to care for her mother, she would enjoy going with us.

During this whole visit, Carrie, the blind mother, sat quietly. I thought that she was listening to the TV that was right by her and a mild distraction for the rest of us. Soon Carrie's daughter, Victoria, and two grandchildren arrived for a birthday get-together. We asked if we could have prayer before we left and Carrie agreed. Whenever we

have prayer after we conclude our visit, we ask the sister if she would like to say it or would like to call on someone and usually the sister will have either Sister Brown or me pray. This time I turned to Grandmother Carrie and asked if she would like to pray. She shook her head yes and bowed her head and began one of the most heart-felt prayers I have heard on my mission. She prayed for her family, their home, the grandchildren, their bodies and good health, and then she prayed for us. This little grey-haired blind wisp of a woman raised her voice clear and strong and I had no doubt that the Lord heard every word! When she was through, I commented that to look at Carrie one would think she was very frail but there was no question that her faith was strong. What a sweet experience for us!

One of the things that I've had the hardest time adjusting to on my mission is the fact that the people we work with consider us ministers of religion. In fact, one day we were in a parking lot at a rest home and the only place left to park was in a place reserved for "ministers". I passed right by it but Sister Wege corrected me and said that we were ministers and so we could park there! And we did, being sure that our badges were plainly visible!

It is fairly common for sisters to stop us at Church or activities and request that we pray for them and their families. It always takes me back a bit realizing that people think we have strong faith and a direct line to the Lord. I've learned that when people ask that, I write down their name and include them on the temple prayer roll when we go each week.

Our temple here has been closed for cleaning and maintenance so it's been three weeks since I last was at the temple. I really miss that opportunity! We go on Wednesdays and I will usually take in at least two sessions after a time at the Family History Center. It gives us a good pick-me-up in the middle of our week and is a time Sister Brown and I enjoy.

This week we are transporting three Filipino women with us. They have recommends but seldom attend because none of them owns a car. The ward is good to help them attend church on Sunday's but the temple is usually not a possibility. I call them "our little Filipino women." They are all about a head shorter than Sister Brown and I. They were baptized several years ago but they have never learned the English language very well since they live in a retirement community called "Miss Filipino's Apartments" where Tagala is spoken. There is a Bible study time in Tagala sponsored by one of the local Catholic Church's for three hours on Thursday evenings and they love hearing religion taught in their native language as well as enjoying the camaraderie of the other Filipino residents. I'm trying to get a study time for them with an LDS instructor as I think that mixing Catholicism with Mormonism may not be helping them much.

Well, I best close and get some breakfast before it's time to leave. I need to review the names of the sisters we met last week so I can say hello and use their name today as I meet and greet them. The young Elders called yesterday and asked if we went with them if we could visit any of their contacts as they have three ladies whom they are teaching who they think would respond to us. We have permission from the stake president so maybe we will be adding that to our other visits this week. It's difficult to really get to know these sisters without visiting their homes. We'll see how it goes. Love to all.

January 20, 2013

The big news of the week is that Josh is going to Canada on his mission! Congratulations! I can't remember which mission but I think Manitoba? It is directly above Montana and extends northward all the way to the North Pole! How can I forget all these details? Probably the best advice is to check Josh's Facebook page. It's been a fun week at the Bennions!

Today in the Saturday night stake conference session President Matsumori announced that the Brethren expect the missionary numbers to reach 90,000 by the end of 2013; then to plateau off at about 75,000. At that point the Church will decide whether to open new missions or just absorb the numbers in existing ones. We will be getting about 20 more missionaries in the very near future!

Our week was full of ups and downs. We spent the better part of Saturday taking three little Filipino sisters to the temple. They don't drive and it has been a long time since they have been. It was no easy task. These three sisters are all in their late 70's and immigrated to the U.S. over 20 years ago. They live in senior housing; the building called "Mrs. Filipino". We visit them although they are all very faithful despite the fact that they speak very little English. When we visited last time, we invited them to the temple and they were overjoyed.

When we picked them up this morning, they were huddled inside the front door of the building eagerly awaiting us. The minute we pulled up they came bustling out of the building with their suitcases, their canes, their purses, and coats. The next hurdle was getting them buckled in. Sister Brown's car seats three on the middle seat but it's pretty "cheek to cheek" if you get my drift. I knew that they needed to buckle up but it readily became obvious that they were going to need some help. It was only accomplished by having them move this way and that and me lying over their laps fastening the right latch into the right buckle. It reminded me of what you mothers go through putting your babies in their car seats. By the time we had everyone buckled in we were all laughing.

The Washington D.C. Temple has been closed for three weeks for maintenance and so everyone in the temple district must have decided to attend today. Since I was driving I pulled up on the circular drive and let Sis Brown and the ladies out. I told Sis Brown to go ahead and take them to get dressed and ready for the session and I would park and be along shortly. That shortly became a little longer when I circled the parking area twice coming up empty handed for a parking space. Finally, I drove out of the temple parking area and parked in the Visitor's Center parking. It gave me a chance for a brisk morning walk and to mingle with all the people who were on the temple grounds, awaiting the emergence of new brides, newly endowed missionaries, and other patrons.

When I arrived Sis Brown and ladies were standing in a long line to get their clothes issued but Ana had her own so she and I went in to get dressed. There were so few lockers available that we got the last two keys and Sis Brown and group had to wait in line for a locker, too. When they were escorted to their lockers Sis Brown instructed them to dress only in their temple dress, hose, and shoes. Despite her best efforts when Fatima and Sylvia emerged a while later, they were totally dressed including all their temple robes! Luckily some of the ordinance workers saw the problem and helped to repack the envelopes with the robes and get the sisters to the new name booths and on their way.

Now the task of getting them to the elevators and into the right endowment room despite the crowded hallways. At one point I moved on ahead telling them that I would make sure that the door wasn't shut without us and they came along single file, canes clicking with each step. I was in the lead and Sister Brown was at the rear. Later in describing the moment Sister Brown said that it was like "pushing a chain". Despite these setbacks, we did manage to get our little group to the fourth floor on time for the 11:30 session.

We asked earlier regarding earphones and a Tagalog translation and that took a little preparation but the temple ordinance workers are accustomed to the cultural diversity of the area and soon the lades were seated and earphones on and draped around their necks. Sister Brown and I both rode shotgun, helping with all we could but fortunately one of the followers for the session was Filipino and she kept a watchful eye on our group. It was also an own endowment session and I didn't want in any way to mar the occasion for the new missionaries. When difficulties arose with the earphones part way into the film, I worked frantically in the dark trying to correct the problem. Finally I signaled to the Filipino follower and she came and replaced the earphones with new ones. In some respects I felt like we were the side show to the main event.

Fortunately, everyone was kind and patient and understanding and treated our sweet ladies like they were royalty. By the time the day was over and we were headed home I felt like I'd been through the war (Pacific theatre) as did Sister Brown. But, of course, we didn't get each other's whole story until later when we had a chance to visit.

I guess the purpose of this lengthy narrative is just to bear witness that from the time we first met with these ladies and learned of their circuitous journey to this moment in time we have felt that the Lord accepted their offering as they have done the best they could with the situations they were in. As we picked them up earlier that day and I drove out of the apartment parking lot into the busy traffic the thought kept coming into my mind, "Be careful. You are hauling precious cargo!" That is something that I often think at home when one of you kids have come for a visit and when that visit is over you and your little (and big) ones are loaded for departure. As you pull out of the driveway and I wave good-bye I find myself thinking, "Be careful. You are hauling precious cargo!" The Lord loves His children!

On Tuesday I received a call from one of our sisters who we had an appointment with on Thursday. She was calling to cancel. The apartment they lived in had been condemned and they had to be out in 48 hours. We knew there

were problems between her and the land lady but this was so sudden. I talked through with her all her options, trying to motivate her to solve this problem with her own family and the resources at hand. She had been checking with women shelters in the area and nothing was available. She had no family in the area and just started a new job so she couldn't visit her family in Virginia without jeopardizing her job. I told her that I would call the R.S. President and Bishop but promised nothing.

Thus began a several day ordeal with all kinds of details and arrangements and Church involvement. It wasn't just one woman; it was her and her disabled daughter, her unwed pregnant daughter and two-year-old grandson. She had joined the Church about a year ago, had attended one time to ask for a food order, and had never been seen or heard from since. And of course, then we come along and befriend her just weeks before all you know what breaks loose in her life. If there was a bright spot in this situation it was that it rained so hard for two days that the sheriff extended the time for her to vacate and it gave us all a chance to get arrangements made.

Well, to make this story short, with a lot of financial assistance from the ward by Friday we were loading the moving van with the help of four full-time Elders, unloading the van into a storage unit, helping the family get settled into a motel until the first of February, and doing other things to make sure this little family wasn't out on the streets. It was emotionally and physically exhausting to be a part of it all. I have never been so grateful for the full-time missionaries!

What added to the complexity of this situation was that the family was living in a lot of filth, nothing had been packed or organized to move, no one but the Church cared enough to offer a hand, and the family seemed oblivious to the fact that this was their responsibility, not ours, and yet they acted as if we were paid employees at their disposal.

So many times when I help in these situations I see irresponsibility and ingratitude and that just irks me. But, watching the disabled daughter and the two-year-old grandson and knowing that they were innocent victims in this drama helped me to put aside my reservations and put on a happy smile.

President Oaks' talk of last conference about children really fit this scenario. I wanted to bundle up the 14-year-old daughter and beautiful two-year-old son and bring them home with me and give them a chance at life. I can't see how they will ever change this pattern of living while living in the family they do. It's heartbreaking. And the other sad fact of life out here is that every baby brings with it a monthly government check so the girls keep having babies without the security of marriage or a husband and resist any suggestions that they are acting irresponsibly or in their own self-interest.

Well, enough of the negative. Be grateful for a noble birthright! Be grateful that you have been taught to get out of bed in the morning, to clean up your space, to comb your hair and brush your teeth and accept responsibility for the choices you make. Be grateful for the truths of the gospel that give your life purpose and hope and joy. Be grateful for a roof over your head and for the security you feel, knowing that there will be food to eat and a bed to sleep in. And in the midst of our gratitude let us reach out to those around us and do what we can to lift burdens, gladden hearts, and bring others to Christ. Love to all. Mom

January 26, 2013

Maybe I'll work backwards through the week. We just returned from a viola recital presented by Hailey Vance of the White Plains Ward right here in Waldorf. Sister Brown's first seven months on her mission were spent in the two wards in Waldorf and she has a lot of dear friends here that I have come to know through her. Hailey was accepted to the Indiana University as a freshman in viola performance and is an amazing musician. She was accompanied at the recital by a fellow who is a professional musician with the Army band and also performed with another sister who has a truly awesome voice! It was such a treat!

Yesterday we had our first real snow storm of the season. We just happened to be helping the full time Elders by transporting a sister to the Visitor's Center. When we finished up at the V.C. and headed home we were in the middle of a blizzard. I have learned that the people out here have little tolerance for snow. When the storm was predicted the schools announced an early release. Those who couldn't avoid driving in the storm were being very careful. The freeway was clear, visibility was excellent, and yet the vehicles were all going about 35 miles per hour! I used to get irritated with Daddy when he drove too fast for existing conditions but 35 m/p/h is a bit much

even for me! It took us two hours to make a one-hour drive. Fortunately, the snow is pretty much gone today. This past week the school kids had two snow days and we got a total of two inches!

Thursday was zone conference. Zone conference is always fun as well as inspirational. Although much of what we learn is for the young missionaries, it's still nice for us senior missionaries to feel like we are in the loop. I'm always amazed at all that is expected of them! I keep thinking about all of you returned missionaries and of your struggles. Those stories have more meaning for me now. I don't think I realized then just how tough it can be.

Speaking of missionaries: Laurel is expecting her mission call this week! I don't know how they are going to do it since she is in Provo and the family is in Boise but I'm sure they have figured out a way to share the experience. Laurel, please let us know the minute you know!!!

On Wednesday I went to the Family History Library and had a sweet visit with Sister Wege. She told me the names of everyone who attended Church in the College Park Ward the previous Sunday whom I had visited while a missionary there. She said it was like a huge payday for all our efforts over the months. It was my favorite area because we got to stay for six months and focus on just that ward. Sister Wege and Sister Harper are still working the ward and they are enjoying a wonderful harvest! Person after person that we were working with have finally come around. She named about 15 families who are starting to come back or who are preparing for the temple! Some of them we felt like we were banging our heads against a wall when we went back time after time. But something must have clicked for them because they are coming now and the ward is rejoicing in all the wonderful activation going on! I so appreciated Sister Wege sharing this with me. In my present situation we only stay in the ward for two months and it's hard to see the fruit although the ward leadership tells us that we are breathing new life into their activation efforts. That's always good to hear.

We met with the stake Relief Society president on Tuesday and she asked for suggestions as to how we would alter the program now that we have been working it for over a year. Later she met with the stake president and gave him our suggestions and he said, "Just let them handle it the way they want. They know best." Yes!!!! Now we can work in the wards that truly need us and spend more time ministering and building relationships. We appreciated his confidence in us.

Although the Church missionary committee has given permission for this program to continue, in order to process the young sister and elder missionary applications, the senior missionary program has in some ways been put on hold so we're hoping that there will be replacements for Sister Wege and I when it's our time to leave. My new companion, Sis Boone arrives on February 18th. Sis Brown is getting trunky!

Let me share just one experience. There is a lady, Sherrilyn, who has been inactive for as long as she has been a member. The first time I dropped in I was alone since Sis Brown was ill. Sherrilyn came to the door. I didn't have a phone number for her so we hadn't set an appointment. She said that she didn't have time for a visit but to come back another time. I had the impression as I left the doorstep that that may have been my only chance to really see her and that I should have prolonged the doorstep chat long enough to get a feel for her. Well, my impression was right. Every time after that initial contact we couldn't catch her home.

One time her three children were home and they were so sweet and friendly and gave me their mother's phone number. Well, the number was a work number and I didn't want to get her in trouble at work so after one cool reception from her supervisor, I knew that I shouldn't call that number again. I think in another family letter I mentioned the time that Sherrilynn was upstairs and called out of her window that she wasn't home. Even though these rejections weren't fun, I still felt like I wanted to try one last time before we wrote them off.

So we were visiting in the area and we dropped in again, this time about 3:30 which was before Sherrilyn goes to work and after the kids get home from school. I knocked on the door and could hear the TV going and the kids talking. The kids are about 14, 10, and 7 years old. The minute I knocked I could hear the kids come to the door and look out at me through the peep hole. That is very common around here. Everyone has a peephole in their door and most don't open the door unless they like what they see standing outside. I then heard them yell, "Mom, it's that Church lady again!" I could hear Sherrilyn respond, "Tell her that this isn't a good time for me right now."

The kids opened the door and told me that it wasn't a good time for a visit. I was ready with my spiel. I said, "Will you give your mom a message for me. My companion and I are being moved to a new area and we may not be able to come and visit you again. I want you to know that we would love to have you come to Church and be a part of the ward. There are many people there who love you and who want to be your friends." They said that they would give their mother the message. Hopefully sometime in the future this sweet young family will have the desire to make the gospel a part of their lives. I would love to see it happen while I'm here but whether it does or not, hopefully they have had a positive touch with the Church.

February 3, 2013

The big news of the week is that Laurel has her call....to Honduras! I'm not going to try to even spell the name of the city. She enters the Guatemalan MTC on May 29. If I remember right, Josh enters the Provo MTC on the 5th of June. It would have been fun for them to have been in the MTC together! I suspect that with the new age requirements there are going to be lots of cousins serving at the same time throughout the Church which has been the case before now but now even more! It's interesting that so far Sam, Josh, and Laurel all received calls to missions that no one in our extended family has ever served in before! Some of you family history buffs will remember that Josh's 5th great grandfather lived in Canada before joining the Church and fleeing to the United States to join the saints here. His name was Archibald Gardner and he was chased on horseback by an angry mob and escaped by leaving his horse on the banks of the St. Laurence River and jumping from one ice floe to the other as he crossed the river. He had immigrated to Canada from England and had a thriving lumber business before he joined the Church. Anyway, Josh, you are returning to the land of some of your forefathers!

Every time I think of the change in Church's missionary age policy I have to smile. Tim said that while he was on his mission to Mexico that the native missionaries could serve at 18 and there were times when he wondered why them and not the U.S. young men. I guess others had the same question and now the heaven's have opened and proclaimed that the time is right for this wonderful change! And I'm alive to share in the blessings!

The high spot of my missionary experiences this week was working at "The Ministry of Love" as a volunteer. Sister Brown and I arrived with the R.S. president, Kay Clarke, and after a much too lengthy orientation, we were put to work helping in the clothing room. Most of the volunteers were young people who were mentally and physically handicapped. The donations would be gone through initially by some other workers and then brought into the clothing area in grocery carts and hung up.

It was obvious right at the start that someone needed to take charge and our sweet little Kay Clarke, an elderly 5'2" black sister and Relief Society president did so with tact and sweetness. Soon all the helpers were running this way and that, repositioning clothing according to types, sizes, gender, and other identifying things that made it easier for the shoppers. It was a pleasure to become acquainted with the workers as we reorganized the room and spiffed things up.

I had on my missionary name tag and when I first started working that day I just smiled at the other workers and communicated that way. Then it came to me that I should learn their names. Soon we'd learned the names of several of the workers and it made for a friendly atmosphere. Before our shift was finished one of the workers, Scotty, and I got the broom and vacuum and began a systematic cleaning of the floor and areas under the clothes racks, behind the doors, and in general, the entire area. It just looked so nice and Scotty thought so, too. He couldn't speak but he had a hand-held instrument that he could spell out what he wanted to say and so he would talk to me that way. As we completed our shift and were putting things away, Scotty spelled out on his device, "Sister Larsen; a cleaning missionary." And I wanted to add, "And loving every minute of it!"

I'm looking forward to going this week and renewing my acquaintance with these sweet volunteers. I don't know if I've said it before but I'll say it again, one of the easiest things about being a missionary is loving the people! Black, brown, white, rich, or poor, these people are easy to love and it is a pleasure and privilege to represent Jesus Christ and extend to them His love and helping hand.

I don't mean to be critical, but since I have volunteered many times in Blackfoot at the Deseret Industries and seen how it is run, I

couldn't help comparing the two humanitarian facilities. I hope all of you children realize that you are a member of one of the most organized, efficient, marvelous, and amazing organizations on the planet! All that aside from the fact that we are led by a modern-day prophet who speaks with God and reveals His holy mind and will to us. Isn't it great to be a part of such a movement and cause!!!

Another interesting thing: today a fellow bore his testimony and mentioned that he was soon going to return to Utah and wanted to express his love to the members of the ward for being so welcoming to him. Later I bore my testimony. After the meeting this fellow (about our age) wanted to visit and he told us that he had been sent by the state of Utah to work on a committee in D.C. finding solutions to the problems of the homeless. He said that Utah is doing some innovative things with their homeless population and he has been sharing these ideas with others in the nation. The Utah committee did some studies and found what the "price" of homelessness was to the state. They followed several perpetually homeless people through their activities for a year. The results of the study were astounding! On an average the price per person was about $40,000-$50,000. One man's expense was over $500,000! Such costs as emergency medical services were factored into the equation.

After recognizing just what the costs were, the state proposed that they erect some housing that would be free to families that qualified but also people who agreed to work with a social service counselor and attend such things as addiction recovery sessions. There are three such facilities right now in the Salt Lake Valley. These are separate and apart from the inner-city programs that the LDS Church runs. This fellow recognized that we were in the mainstream of the Church and would be interested in some of what he had been doing.

In closing I want to share a snapshot with you of our choir practice last week. It was so sweet that I just chuckled about it all the way home. We have seven members--Sister Brown and I are the only ones with any prior experience. The pianist is marginal in her abilities but both she and the conductor are so happy to be serving. The practice lasted an hour and 10 minutes and we rehearsed four phrases from "I Believe In Christ". The conductor was honest with us all and would say such things as "Saundra, what is that yur singing? It jist don't sound right! Put your head over there by hers and listen." "Willie, I know you want to sing a solo and before we're through you can. For now jist sing with the rest of us." "Ramona, are you still singin what you sang on this last year 'cause that ain't gonna work this time. And I'm listening to yur voice and I'm not sure you're gettin it!"

At the beginning of the practice Sister Holness asked for any volunteers to give a prayer and my partner, Sister Garvin, got picked, after Sister Holness promised the other disappointed members that she would call on them next time. Sister Garvin began her beautiful prayer, "Almighty God, please go down into our mouths and into our throats and into our lungs and let us have beautiful music come forth that we may praise Thee!" No, it wasn't the traditional LDS prayer but who could doubt that it was heard and recorded above!

There are just so many amazing unbelievable things that I see each week that are so foreign to my Utah/Idaho background that each day is an adventure. These people are truly coming out of obscurity and darkness into the light of the gospel and it's wonderful to see. And in the meantime, I'm learning so much from them about faith, and prayer, and goodness. I'm learning about hope and charity, and about carrying on against unbelievable odds. I feel so blessed to be here!

Now let me thank each of you for fasting for Bonnie today. She wrote me a sweet note yesterday thanking us for joining them in fasting. Thank you for joining with us across the miles. I know she would welcome your continuing prayers.

February 9, 2013

Although the weather reports have been full of news of the blizzards that hit the East coast, we have been unaffected here in Maryland. Last Saturday was cold and windy as Sister Brown and I drove to the southern tip of Maryland where the Patuxent River and the Chesapeake Bay converge. Everything looked so drab and even the water looked gray and foreboding. All the National Park areas were closed until March so we were disappointed that we didn't get to see some lighthouses before Sister Brown leaves on the 23rd for Utah. Each senior missionary has a "bucket list" and getting some photos of lighthouses was one thing on Sister Brown's list that didn't get done. Today we went to lunch with some of her friends and next week we'll have a

couple more "good-bye" parties before her departure. It's kind of a challenge to focus on the work with all the hub-bub but maybe I'll feel different when it's my time to leave.

Nothing much to report. Spent the days visiting and encouraging. Found a young sister who recently moved into the area but who hadn't yet connected with the YSA Ward so we helped her make some connections there. Found another young mother who was so sweet and friendly over the phone. She and her husband have just moved to the area with the military so they are anxious to make friends and our visit will help them network with the ward.

Another visit was with a couple who have lived all over the world with the military and joined the church many years ago. At some point they had a tiff with the Bishop of our ward and haven't been back since. It has been about five years and she asked us if he was still bishop and when we affirmed that he was, she said that we'd see them return when he was gone. Wow, what a tragedy that they are letting something like that keep them from eternal blessings. Our lives really are all about choices--for good or ill.

Had an interesting conversation with Tim last night. This past week there were hearings held in the State Legislature on some sort of tax legislation. Because Scentsy is the top company in Idaho for creating jobs, their CFO was invited to testify about how the proposed law would impact business. The CFO was out of town and Tim's boss didn't want to take time to do it so Tim prepared some information and testified before the House committee about the impact of what they were proposing. He said it was a very interesting opportunity and he was asked to return to do the same presentation before the Senate committee. Of course, he couldn't help thinking about Grandpa Larsen and his years as a force for good in Idaho politics.

I miss having Allan around to field all my questions about political issues. He knew so much and was always willing to enlighten me. Maybe I'll mention a few of the things he used to say that I thought were insightful. "Don't be the first to try something, but don't be the last either". "You can say about anything to a person if they know you love and respect them". "Learn to disagree agreeably". "If you want to succeed in the political arena, you need to affiliate with one of the two parties." "Be careful in your relationships with women. If you never, ever touch your secretary you won't have any regrets".

Allan had a great deal of confidence in America and its people. One time I shared with him some negative opinions of an acquaintance of mine regarding this country, and Allan said, "I just can't be that negative. I have traveled it from one end to the other and met with leaders from all walks of life and I just can't be so negative. People need to get out and do something good and make a difference instead of just sitting on the sidelines and complaining."

Allan was known for his fairness as the Speaker of the House. Both parties felt that he was willing to hear their side of the issue. He used to tell a joke (when he was serving in the House.) It went like this, "One night Barbara awoke and said, "Allan, wake up. I think there is a thief in the house!" Allan replied, "Maybe in the Senate, dear, but never in the House!"

He also had some wonderful sayings that related to his Church work: "We need more business in Church and more Church in Business." Allan dealt with a lot of serious issues as stake president and heard a lot of confessions. He told Dad and me that once he was approached on the street by a fellow who said, "President Larsen, do you remember me? You helped me through some rough times in my early years." Allan said that he recognized the fellow but couldn't for the life of him remember what his problems had been. Then Allan bore witness that if he, a mortal, could "remember them no more" he felt confident that the Lord was also able to do the same. Allan was so upbeat and optimistic with people and very seldom was critical.

One time we were having dinner with the family at the Larsen's and the phone rang. The legislative session had just finished up for the year and one of the last bills brought before the Legislature just hours before they were scheduled to adjourn was the "Equal Rights Amendment". Because there had not been time to properly debate and consider this bill, Allan voted against it and the phone call that day was from an irate woman who heard that he had voted against it. Allan knew that it's easier to never pass a law than to try to have it repealed once it is voted in. Many of Allan's concerns about ERA were realized in the coming years as state after state voted for it. Looking back, I think many women today can ask themselves if they are really better off with it

than they were with the existing laws. Some of it was good, some bad.

Nothing in the political world is ever simple, I've decided. One of the movies that I've seen on my mission is "Lincoln". I thought it was gripping and also interesting to see how complex these national issues are. Allan used to say that "nothing is ever accomplished politically without compromise". He said that once when I asked him about his vote on an issue that I thought was pretty cut and dried if you were a good Church member. That is when he told me that compromise is the key to finding solutions.

Let me also mention what Mike said about the meeting he attended where Elder Holland conducted a question-and-answer session. Someone asked about the BSA case before the Supreme Court and President Holland said that the Church's legal team thinks that the Court will turn the case back to the individual sponsors to decide for themselves if they will permit gays to hold leadership in BSA. He said that the Church will come under fire because they are going to hold to their position and there will be lawsuits against the Church that cannot be won because of the laws on the books. So...it was Elder Holland's opinion that the Church will no longer be involved in scouting. Mike said that Elder Holland teared up when he was talking about it and said that scouting has been a wonderful organization that has built integrity and patriotism in our nation's youth and that it will be a huge loss. Mike said he wondered as he listened to Elder Holland if Dad was "turning over in his grave" over this! Probably so.

He also said that Elder Holland indicated that the Brethren are in the process of opening up new missions and that the workload on them from the new policies is just huge!

I envy Mike getting to attend those sessions. The one I attended with Elder Bednar was amazing! Well, I'm going to close and start my phoning for next week. That is something I won't miss after my mission--setting up appointments and booking our days. This week is the Chinese New Year and John and Becky and families are on holiday in Thailand. I reminded her to be sure to book a motel on a hill back away from the shore! Hope they have a great time!

February 17, 2013

The big news of the week is that Jenny's folks have received their assignment: Milwaukee, Wisconsin! In the same area that Jenny's brother, Spencer, lives. But, I'll not say more since Jenny always does a great job of giving us an update and I'm sure she'll give us the details in her account. Congratulations to Laurie and President Cutler!

I've got a couple hours before we leave for a dinner appointment with a sweet family here in Waldorf so hopefully, I can get this finished up. We've had a wonderful day at Church! We're getting better acquainted with the members of our two wards and it's fun to meet and greet them and be a part of things. This was Sister Brown's last Sunday as a missionary and so it was full of bitter/sweet emotions for her.

Yesterday we had lunch with the R.Society president of the Calvert Ward. She lives in a three-story home that sits about 20 feet away from the shore of the Chesapeake Bay. She bought a tumbledown cottage several years ago and included some hurricane insurance. That year before she had even had time to do the fixing up that she planned to do, Hurricane Isabel came through and washed her little home away! But, because she was insured, she was able to rebuild on her property from the ground up and she named her modern and cozy home, "Isabel's Gift". The living room and kitchen/dining area are on the second level and it includes a deck that has a rocking chair and other lounge furniture. Although yesterday was wet, cold, and windy and the Bay was gray and choppy, usually she can relax in her wonderful cottage and enjoy the scenery! What a beautiful spot! The whole tip of Maryland is so laced with waterways and beautiful green woods that it is just gorgeous! I can see why people love living in this area.

Yesterday Sis Brown and I participated in a Humanitarian project with the members of the Capital Hill Ward. We gave blood. Daddy was always so faithful when it came to giving blood but my tendency towards anemia gave me an excuse not to. This time I figured I might as well give it a try. The Blood Mobile parked in the church parking lot and we arrived about 11:00 for our appointment. As we went through the screening process Sister Brown was rejected because her blood was low in iron. She was disappointed but in another way she was grateful to know why she has been so tired lately. She thought maybe it was her medications that were doing it but now she knows that it is also because she is anemic. It felt good to join the other ward members in this effort. There is a huge Children's

National Hospital in D.C. that draws patients from all over the country and all the blood that was donated will be used at that facility.

It just so happened that the fellow that gave blood at the same time that I did was also from Idaho and so as we left the Bloodmobile I pointed out to the nurses that the blood they collected from Brother Barclay and me was of the highest quality----with origins in Idaho!

This past week one of the senior couples serving in Anacostia received some disturbing news. Sister Bingham (yes, from the Snake River area originally) had a lump growing on her neck. She went in for tests last week and received word that there is a large blood clot forming in her jugular vein. Her son, who is a cardiologist in Provo, confirmed the advice that she received here that she should just "wait and see" since operating on it could prove fatal. The hope (and prayer) is that the clot gradually dissipates but of course, it has added a lot of worry and stress for her and Elder Bingham. Up to this time the lump hasn't been painful but today she left our meetings early because she was uncomfortable and the muscles around that area were aching.

On Monday we took Chris Williams, a single sister in the ward, to her cancer treatment. She has pancreatic cancer and in the last two years she has suffered a stroke, had heart surgery, and went through a time of blindness. She told us that with the way things are going for her, she probably will get leprosy soon. She was joking but truly these last two years have been a nightmare for her. She is about 35 and lives alone but has a wonderful support group in friends and in the ward. She had a promising career as a nurse before all of this started happening and her cancer prognosis isn't very bright but she has a wonderful attitude and is grateful that for now she is able to continue to take care of herself and get good care.

I guess that one blessing of serving a mission is that you become aware of the challenges that people face and also of their courage in just taking life a day at a time and accepting what comes their way. Another blessing is being accepted by the ward members and being included in their circle of friends. The members of all the wards we serve in are so accepting of us. I know it will be an adjustment to return to regular life once this name tag comes off.

The last talk given today in sacrament meeting was by the high priest group leader, Brother Oludipe. This whole month the topic has been on temple and family history work. All of the speakers have addressed that topic and done a great job but this fellow had a powerful voice and a strong testimony and he really connected with the audience.

First he told them that many generations ago in his family they had certain rituals that they followed in an "Enclave" or place for those rituals. He said that some of the rituals were similar to the temple ordinances but that when he attended the temple, he knew that these ordinances were given of the Lord and they were pure and without pagan additions. He said that if they would read the first seven books in the Bible and study them closely, they would see that the temple teachings were taught anciently and that the temple is the place to learn these sacred things.

He told of being with friends and telling them that he was going to the temple. He said that they said to him, "You cain't go in that temple 'cause yure black!" (This brought down the house with laughter) But, he said, I told them, "I ken go and I'z goin'!" Then the speaker told the congregation about a recent convert who asked him about doing baptisms for the dead. She said that she didn't want to dig up any dead person and go into the water with them and he had to straighten her out and let her know that it was done by proxy and not actually diggin' up the dead.

He then told about the endowment and learning about the creation of the earth and then he told them about getting married for eternity. As he concluded his talk he sang the entire first verse of "I Have A Family Here on Earth" and before he was through a lot of the children in the congregation were singing along with him. It was just so sweet! He really connected-- even the little ones were listening.

There is something deeply satisfying about seeing people grab on to the gospel truths and then make those adjustments and changes in their lives that need to be made. The gospel is truly a system of beliefs (as Lorenzo Snow describes it) that fits all times and seasons and can produce joy and help us reap blessings through our obedience.

Sister Brown's daughter called her late last night with some problems so she was up very late talking to her. This morning she slept in and we were having a hard time getting out of the door and on our way. I was pushing as hard as I could

without losing my cool. We even had companionship prayer traveling down the highway at 60 mph. (I promised I wouldn't close my eyes). When we walked in the chapel with two minutes to spare, there was our mission president, President Matsumori sitting on the stand. Boy, was I grateful that we were on time! Sister Matsumori motioned for us to join her in the congregation and we did!

Right on our heels was a young father with three small children, one a baby in arms. I noticed him last week and saw that the three-year-old was a handful. Well, they hadn't been sitting for very long before the problems began with the baby crying and the little girl yelling about something. He immediately got up and tried to get both children out of the chapel without a scene, but carrying a crying 9-month-old with a three-year-old hanging on to your leg and protesting is never pleasant.

It just so happened that last night as I was loading my Church bag I included a small bag of valentine hearts on the off chance that someone might need them. When the problems erupted, I followed him out and offered some candy hearts to the little girl and soon we were back sitting in church and enjoying the Spirit of the meeting. The three-year-old loved choosing the different colored hearts and was sitting on my lap and treating me like I was her grandmother! Order was restored and I gave a silent thank you for the promptings that resulted in a tiny miracle during sacrament meeting.

February 24, 2013

Today my new companion arrived from Mississippi. She arrived with her son, Steven, and then we drove him to the airport to catch his flight home. Dorinda is exactly my age, had her two oldest daughters the same years and months as Steph and Shauntel, her oldest son is named Steven, and she has 10 kids. We knew each other at BYU when our husbands were students and we were stay-at-home moms. We were in the same ward and "there's been a lot of water under the bridge" since we last were together. What a tender mercy that our paths should cross now. She has been widowed for about two years. Her husband had cancer and fought it for a long time with treatments, but he eventually succumbed to it. Some of you have heard me tell the story of being friends with her husband, Daniel, and of making the mistake of one time calling him "Dan". With his deep southern drawl, he said to me, "Mu friends call me Daniel". I got the message.

Dorinda reminds me of myself in so many ways. When I was showing her the private bedroom and bathroom for her own use she said, "Oh, a bathtub! Yes. I just love a hot bath at night!" I knew right then that we were kindred spirits!

Before Sister Brown left this morning, she commented that I would probably love Sister Boone since we have so much in common and I reminded Sister Brown that sometimes opposites attract and she smiled at that because in so many ways we were opposites! But over the course of the last five months, I truly have come to love and appreciate her for her goodness.

When I was first transferred to Waldorf, I was dreading this companionship because I knew that Sister Brown was in poor health and had other issues that could make things difficult. As I got into the work here, I could see why her last companion got rankled with her but I was prayerful and asked the Lord to help me find the good. As the weeks passed, I could see so much good and I tried to help her see her own strengths. As I commented on her strengths, I could see her growing in her self-confidence and even her physical health improved. We had a lot of fun together and could laugh at ourselves when we did stupid things, which we often did. As she left today she said, "You saved me on my mission. I wouldn't have stayed if you hadn't come along to be my companion." It was a tender moment and I could honestly say to her that our time together had been sweet. I know the Lord gave me the insight and patience to handle the situations and keep her happy and productive. She was pretty teary as we parted. She was worrying about the transition back into her life in Utah. She'll be fine.

She is doing me a huge favor. I have wanted a memento of my time in D.C. and I've kept looking and wondering what to buy. Both Sister Brown and Harper had an Amish lady quilt them beautiful quilts and shams for their beds back home but the price tag was nearly a$1,000 so I figured I needed to go for something a little more reasonable. I found a beautiful oak platform rocker at the Amish market but the cost of shipping it would have been about the same as the cost of the rocker so I dismissed the idea.

When Sister Brown realized that I wasn't going to get it she told me that she would bring the rocking chair home with her since she was already renting

a U-Haul for the trip home. She arrived in a suburban but went home pulling a U-Haul trailer. She would tell people that she singlehandedly was supporting the Amish colony in the area! Well, she really wasn't but she did have a lot of things she purchased from them that she will have for her home in Utah. I so appreciated her willingness to take the rocker home for me. I don't know how I'll get it from her but she said that once she's settled, we'll work out the details. ....Long story short: I got my memento from D.C.

FYI: I received my travel plans home today. As of now I will arrive in SLC at 4:00 p.m. on May 18th. Josh has his homecoming on the 19th and Laurel on the 26th and Anna's graduation on the 29th, the same day that Laurel flies out for Guatemala's MTC. I plan to visit you kids those two weeks, arriving home about on June 1st. SaraKay arrives on June 18th and I've asked Bp Adams for a combined homecoming on the 23rd. Haven't heard back yet but hopefully that will work. I know that we are dealing with a busy time of the year for all of you so do what you can to be a part of these things but know that I understand that everyone has demands that sometimes can't be changed. This is the last time I'll mention this since I want to think about other things for the next 10 weeks and not worry about going home.

As far as missionary experiences, this past week hit an all-time low. Sis Brown's brother and sister-in-law arrived and Kathy took them to D.C. and other places and between that and having the car lubed and renting a U-Haul, gathering boxes, picking up the last of the Amish purchases, and saying good-byes, we didn't get much done. I'm making stocking caps for a humanitarian project and so I spent a great deal of time sitting in my Amish rocking chair, knitting. Kathy said I looked like Grandma Moses but I was doing my best to be productive so I didn't care. I also did some transcribing on Volume 3 of Larsen Legacy and family history work. It wasn't hard to find enough to do and I kind of enjoyed the chance to kick back and take some time off from visiting and calling.

Tomorrow we have meetings in two wards and a dinner appointment and a planning session for next week. On Monday we will have Dorinda's welcome dinner with President and Sister Matsumori and that will be fun. This past Monday we had Sister Brown and Harper's exit dinner with the Matsumori's so I'm getting in on a lot of fun events. By the way, our new mission president, effective July 1st will be Peter Cooke, the Democratic nominee for the governor of Utah. They have six children and several of them will accompany them on their mission. Lots of changes right now! President Matsumori said that he gets the feeling when he visits with the leaders in SLC that they are so busy with all these changes and can hardly carry the workload they are under. We live in momentous times! Just think of the impact of that one announcement on our family let alone the Church throughout the world!

Dorinda's son is a new stake president and he met last week with L. Tom Perry and he told him that before this year is over there will be close to 100,000 missionaries in the field with the expectation that by the end of 2014 there could be 200,000! Those numbers are higher than I've heard before but they are also more recent so probably more correct. Another number President Matsumori gave us was that normally the MTC houses 2500 missionaries each week. Now that number has risen to 8,000! Dorinda never did stay at the MTC. She was housed at the Marriott in Provo and drove to the MTC for the sessions. What a monumental task to make this transition!

Well, I'm going to bed. Last night about nine o'clock I had some sort of asthma attack. I've struggled with asthma with my allergies to cats but it seems like lately that the cold air brings it on, too. I've got some allergy medicine that has helped a little but not as completely as I would like it to. My health has been so wonderful since I've been on my mission and hopefully this asthma stuff will go away once it warms up. My worse concern is that our neighbors under us or to the side of us have house cats and that somehow that smell is getting into this apartment. I had that happen once so I'm hoping that isn't the problem.

March 3, 2013

Tomorrow is my anniversary and of course, I've been thinking back and feeling grateful that at that young and impressionable age I had the inspiration to choose Daddy and make him my eternal companion. It's hard to think back so far and remember much of anything but a few experiences come to mind. One is of sitting in the foyer of the temple on my wedding day and waiting early that morning for Daddy to arrive. He had always loved the temple and I struggled at first to appreciate it like he did. He and Allan would go to the all-day Priesthood sessions and

spend the whole day in the temple. I couldn't imagine doing that but he loved it.

The morning we were married, he came running in the temple doors and I thought that he looked so handsome and excited! I went through that morning for my own endowment and so everything was very new and different. I was disappointed when we sat down for the session that the men were on one side and the women on the other. Here in the D.C. Temple the endowment rooms are smaller and there is no aisle so at the very center (it is marked with a different color arm rest), the husband and wife, or bride and groom can sit side by side. Anyway, I thought it was strange that he was way over there and I was way over here for the entire session. What a surprise it was when I at last connected with him at the veil!

My mother had told me to relax and not worry about remembering everything. (Knowing what a knot head I was she probably should have told me to not worry about remembering anything!) I tried to do that but from the start in the initiatory I was amazed at the blessings promised me. Some of the endowment instruction seemed very odd but the feeling of goodness and peace was undeniable and so I listened and tried my best to understand the endowment.

When I was fully dressed in the temple robes and had gone through the veil, we proceeded to a sealing room. The sealer was President Willard Wray who lived in the Moreland area and we were his first sealing in his new calling as a sealer. Part way through the ceremony I began to cry............it was just so wonderful and amazing that I had made it to the temple!

We had our wedding breakfast at the Westbank Motel and then our reception that night in Shelley. Allan and Barbara had moved to Blackfoot from the Shelley Stake so they had a lot of good friends in the area as did my folks. It was a wonderful time. That weekend we spent a night in the Westbank Motel and then hurried back to load our gifts up and go to Blackfoot for their stake conference. Allan was sustained as the new stake president that day and we were so grateful to be a part of that event.

Monday was classes and midterm tests at Ricks and life moved forward at a frantic pace. What fun to be married and to come to realize more each day that I truly had chosen wisely and that Daddy was kind and good and helpful and that our lives were full of bright potential. Three weeks later I started throwing up and turning green and life seemed a little less fun but still full of goodness and promise.

I am so grateful that we are sealed together eternally and that we had a good marriage. I pray each night that I'll stay worthy of Daddy. I pray also for each of you children that you will keep your marriages strong and make the gospel the center of your lives. I also pray that Tim and SaraKay will be able to find good mates and have strong families like the rest of you do.

I have enjoyed Dorinda. Although much about our lives is the same, she has had more trials than I have had and I marvel at her strength. She has a deaf daughter who has been of special concern and had years of special needs. Dorinda is a major player in her life and lives close to her and her family so it was especially hard to leave that situation. This daughter went through a time of abuse with her first husband and Dorinda and Daniel helped her navigate to safety. This daughter was one of the main reasons that Dorinda had not planned to serve a mission. She knew that JuneAnn needed her and just didn't see how she could be gone. It took great faith to come on a mission with the situation at home.

Another trial Dorinda has had was the loss of one of her children. She had a baby boy who died about a day after birth. And then there has been the last several years of dealing with Daniel having cancer and the battle with that. In the midst of it all he sold his dental practice but she has limited funds and had to sell the family home since she didn't have the funds to keep up with it. She said that at times she has felt bitterness about things but she is full of courage and determination and has such a strong testimony. She is truly amazing and such a great example to me! I am honored to be spending the next few months as her companion. I know that I can learn a lot from her. I told her that I needed to nominate her for "Mother of the Year". She is so exemplary.

We have enjoyed our time together. We laugh about life with a big family. One day we got to comparing notes about the old jalopies that our kids would drive in high school and college. Of course, I told her about the manure green Toyota and the powder blue Hornet and she told me about some of her families' escapades with old cars and no money. I'm grateful those days are past. I hated having to pray over our cars before we took a trip, but there were years when that is

about what we had to do to ensure that we were get where we were going and home without incident.

Stephani made a presentation at a women's conference a couple of weeks ago and she spoke on covenants. As a part of her discussion and talk she asked the sisters if they had ever felt "angels round about to bear you up". She said that one sister commented that she and her husband are involved organizing their family records and pictures and that as she has gone back through the years of photos and seen herself involved in all the activities of her parenting, she has realized that surely the Lord had born her up and given her strength to accomplish what she needed to do.

The other night Sister Boone and I made a wrong turn and ended up in Alexandria, Virginia at rush hour! Don't ask me how but to complicate matters we had been visiting for the last five hours and had to use the restroom and traffic was moving at a snail's pace! There we were, two elderly sisters trying to navigate our way through heavy traffic back to some place familiar. We thought that Daddy and Daniel were probably up there wondering how we were going to survive but we did and made it home (and to the bathroom) in time.

March 10, 2013

We've had an interesting week: went to lunch with President and Sister Matsumori, attended a sealing in the temple, participated in a Women's Conference, sat out what was supposed to be the worst snow storm of the season, and put in a big week visiting in our new ward. Already we have fallen in love with the Lexington Park area. It is beautiful even in winter and the traffic is less congested so getting around is a snap. We have been accessing the ward maps on the LDS web site that Steve referred us to and we now have the whole area charted with the individual residences marked. It is a wonderful tool. We make appointments with the web site information and just use the map to canvas the area if we have extra time between appointments. The sisters have been good to us and it's nice to know that we'll be around long enough to make a difference.

Today at the Women's Conference I saw a lot of the sisters we have worked with previously and it was very satisfying to have them come up and give me a big hug! People who are living the gospel are so loving and kind and we feel their concern for us and desires to help us have a good experience while we are serving in their stake.

I've loved having Dorinda as a companion. She is even tempered, dedicated, and hard working. We never run out of things to talk about. She relates well to the sisters we visit because she genuinely enjoys them and cares about them. It's been a pleasure working with her. By the way, her grandson just got his mission call ....to the Idaho Boise Mission. In case some of you haven't heard Idaho now has four missions: Idaho, Boise; Idaho Nampa; Idaho Pocatello; and Idaho Twin Falls! I constantly run into people out here who have roots in Idaho! It's so fun to have a natural bond with fellow Idahoans!

I have been thinking about the "gospel net" and all the different fishes that are being pulled into that net. Today at Women's conference we had a luncheon and sitting at the table with Sister Boone and me was a lady from the Philippines, a woman from Zimbabwe, one from Nigeria, one from El Salvador, and another missionary sister from California. All of us were sitting together enjoying lunch and talking and laughing as if we have been next door neighbors for years. It is just so amazing all of the people who are joining the Church and it doesn't seem to have any particular pattern. The one thing in common these women have is that they are "honest in heart". They heard the gospel and because they are deep down good, they recognize it as truth.

One of the sisters we visited this past week was sealed to her husband and three children this afternoon. She is ex-military from Florida and her husband is a Hindu from Guyana, his family originally immigrating to South America from India. They had a very elaborate Hindu wedding and Alissa showed us all the pictures that were taken on that occasion. But, they came in contact with the Church through a friend and Allyssa was immediately drawn to it. To be specific, she heard Elder Uchdorf's talk on "Forget Me Nots" and had a confirmation that this Church had something she could believe in. Anyway, today their five-year-old twins and their three-year-old were brought into the sealing room dressed in white and made a beeline for their parents. One little boy, asked, "What are they going to do with us, Mama?" The sealer was so sweet to them and said, "We are going to make your family an eternal family that will go on and on and on." Once the sealer had all the hands on the alter and began the sealing, the three-year-old decided to leave the alter and look around so he had to be returned to the family and

the ordinance was completed. Then they got together and looked at the mirrors stretching out into infinity and the kids really loved that. It was very touching and reminded me again of the importance of the temple ordinances in our lives.

I received word this week that Bonnie's Grandma Johnson, 91 passed away. I can only imagine what a special funeral it was with all the family gathering to say their final good-bye's to a dear grandma. Certainly a bitter/sweet occasion considering the reunion she received on the other side and the tears that were shed here knowing that she wouldn't be a part of their lives now.

I want to do some thinking out loud right now about the national election and Mitt Romney's defeat. This message hasn't been approved by the First Presidency but is completely the fault (or product) of my own surmising and hearsay. The other day Dorinda's son who is a bishop had the opportunity to attend a leadership seminar in which L. Tom Perry was the visiting authority. At some time during that event Elder Perry was asked about the election. I have had my own questions regarding the election and was happy to hear of the conversation and what Elder Perry had to say. By the way, I felt like Hurricane Sandy arrived at just the wrong time here in the East. Mitt was gaining ground and that storm really played havoc with his campaign schedule and gave Obama a huge advantage as he was on TV and taking the spotlight as he dealt with the disaster. It seemed obvious to me that the Lord could have kept Sandy away but He didn't. I thought that if I was Mitt Romney, I would feel a little bitter that I had done all I could to run a good race and then a storm hits, that the Lord could have prevented, and I go on to lose the election.

Anyway, this is what L. Tom Perry said. He said that Mitt did just what he should have done. He ran a good campaign that brought the Church a great deal of positive publicity and helped the Church grow in its influence. He went on to say that they (meaning the 12?) didn't want Mitt to win because then the Church would be blamed for everything that went wrong in the country and that wouldn't be good for the Church. So there you have it. I'm not sure that helps me feel any better about things but at least it sheds a little light on it. I've wondered if the Twelve in any way gave encouragement to Mitt or have talked with him since his defeat. When Grandpa Larsen was running for Governor he met with Spencer W. Kimball in the Idaho Falls Temple and it was a very sacred time for him and Barbara. They spoke little about it but I know it was a time of strengthening and support.

March 16, 2013

Well, it's happened. I've finally snapped under all the stress of this mission. This morning I got up early and got right into my day. We have had a big week and both Dorinda and I have been looking forward to our time today to take care of all those things we postponed the rest of the week. So, in an effort to get on top of things, I decided to get my birthday calls out of the way. Yesterday was Marci's birthday, today is Chantelle's, tomorrow is Kinzie's and the 19th is Seth's who I have to remember to call on the evening of the 18th. When I take time zones into consideration, making my calls becomes a little trickier than if all of you kids lived next door. Anyway, when I sat down at my desk and looked at the time I thought that if I hurried I could catch Laurel in China before her bedtime. I quickly dialed her number but got the machine. No problem. I would just leave a message. I do that all the time. And besides this may be the only quiet moment of the day. So I left a message and hung up. No sooner had I done that than something went off in my head and I double checked my birthday list and realized that I was a month late for Laurel's birthday! I sent out the cards so long ago that I've lost all awareness of what's what and who's who. Oh, how I wish I hadn't left that message because now I have to admit that I'm coming unglued. So, I hurried and called Laurel back and left another message that I realized it wasn't her birthday but that I was still hoping that she was having a good day and that I still loved her. How embarrassing!

Grandma Ilene said once that the only way a person survives old age with your self-esteem intact was to give yourself the freedom to do one really stupid thing each day. That has worked well for me, too, except when I do it early in the morning. Then I have the entire day left and I've already used up my quota!

One thing I've learned on my mission is to not judge people. Going into a totally new ward is quite a challenge. In a very short time we try to get acquainted by learning names, figuring out who is married to whom, learn the children's names, and learning who's in the leadership positions. We also try to assess where we can be of assistance and try not to say or do anything that would offend. As we begin the process of

visiting in the homes of the sisters we gain a greater understanding of their challenges. Some things that we observe but don't understand at the time become clear to us later.

Case in point: this week we visited with a young sister who has been very friendly with us at Church. But her husband seemed distant and shy. Although we'd had opportunity to interact with him, he didn't seem to want to connect with us. As we visited this sister this week, she showed us her wedding photo album and talked about their unlikely meeting and courtship. Her husband is an extremely bright young man and holds a very prestigious position on the Naval Base. We also learned that shortly after the birth of their first child the husband had a stroke and a seizure. As one can imagine this promising young couple had their world turned upside down. Each day was filled with uncertainty about what was in their future. The miraculous thing about the situation was that although he is an engineer and his job is very technical this stroke didn't diminish his intellect so he can continue to work and provide for his family. What it did affect was his social skills and that was what we were sensing but didn't understand. Recognizing what he was dealing with gave us a whole new prospective and appreciation for him.

I've also learned to follow the Spirit's promptings. One sister asked if she could fix lunch for us as a part of our visit. We normally don't do lunch with the sisters because it takes too long as well as being an inconvenience for them. When this sister asked a second time, we felt that we should make an exception. Later we learned that this sister had never married, was an only child, and that both her parents were gone so her only family was the ward family. As we visited, she showed us her lovely home and also displayed some quilts that she had created and that were her pride and joy. She took us out on the deck to see her daffodils that were starting to bloom and showed us many of the antiques that had been given her by her parents and grandparents.

As we left her home after a sweet visit, Dorinda and I were both grateful that we had consented to spend the time with her. She is a gifted and talented lady and we are so grateful that we can be a part of her life, if only for a few months.

Another experience: Last Sunday as the sacrament was passed a handsome young deacon approached our bench with the sacrament tray. I noticed that he had hearing aids in both ears and I knew immediately that Dorinda would have a special feel for this young man, since her daughter, June Ann, is profoundly deaf in both ears. Well, it just so happened that one of our visits this week was with this young man's mom and we were there visiting when he arrived home from school. After making his acquaintance, we continued our visit and learned that three years earlier their family had lived in Michigan and the father lost his job. After months of searching, they found work in southern Maryland. Both of their extended families lived in the Midwest and they didn't want to move so far away but their joblessness left them no alternative. Only after the move and establishing themselves in this new community did they discover that there are excellent resources here for the deaf and consequently he has had the help that he needed to be successful despite his handicap. The Lord loves His children!

Daily we hear stories of the Lord's tender mercies in the lives of these sisters. He hears their prayers and encircles them in his love and blesses them in very personal and beautiful ways. And as we visit in their homes, we truly feel that we are "on holy ground".

Dorinda and I are enjoying our time together. Sometimes things are so funny that we have a good laugh at each other's expense. Like yesterday when we made a visit and when we got to the car, we noticed that we were covered in dog hair. We hadn't brought our lint roller so we made our way to the next house prepared to apologize for our appearance. As we were getting out of the car, we both started brushing off our skirts as best we could and it was then that Dorinda noticed that she had been wearing her skirt backwards all day! I told her that if I hadn't noticed surely no one else had either but she felt so silly. Later we were talking about movies and how we hated movies with sad endings. Dorinda said that one of her daughters recommended a certain movie to her and she saw it and the ending was so sad that she was feeling down for several days thereafter. She then concluded her comments with, "I like happy. And I'm not doing sad anymore!"

A couple of days ago we were in a subdivision trying to find our way out. Our GPS sometimes will say to proceed to a certain street but won't tell us which way, right or left, so we are on our own until we happen upon the nearby street that we need for the GPS to start giving us directions. This was

the case on this occasion and although we were trying our best we couldn't figure out where the designated street was. I suggested that we go back to where we had been and then go in the opposite direction from where we had just gone. We tried that. At one point I thought I recognized the houses so we continued on but soon discovered that we weren't where we thought we had been. In frustration Dorinda said, "We don't know where we've been or where we are going! We're a sorry lot!" "Yes", I replied, "But our grandchildren are proud of us!" That's how I feel sometimes out here driving, visiting, serving, and doing the best I can given my limitations. We may not be the brightest and best missionaries in the field but we're being obedient and our 80 grandchildren are proud of us! To coin a phrase, "Who could ask for anything more!"

I will conclude by saying that in an attempt to fellowship and activate some sisters we have joined a knitting class each Wednesday night. It was originally meant to be a Relief Society mini-class held for six weeks but that was nearly a year ago and it is going strong and gaining sisters and momentum. Well, in an effort to reach out we are now taking knitting needles in hand and getting ourselves all tangled up in yarn in a weak attempt to learn this skill. Before any of you put in your order for a beautiful cardigan made with alpaca yarn, or before any of you get worried that I'm going to present you with something to wear, let me put your mind at rest. I'm definitely not a natural at it; I've just found a new way to stress myself out! Thank goodness the teacher is patient and I have several Wednesday classes left before I leave for home. At the rate I'm going I may have a dishcloth finished before my time here is at an end. Keep me in your prayers! Love to all. Mom

March 24, 2013

This past week has been cold and blustery and miserable. Each morning I get up, look outside at the bright sunny day and think that finally Spring had sprung, but the minute I poke my head out of the door I realize that looks can be deceiving. One weather forecaster reported that last year at this time the weather was in the high 70's and this year we are still hovering near freezing. Of course, the wind is a factor as well so Dorinda and I both dress in layers so that we can adjust throughout the day to the situations we are in.

I am enjoying the members of the Lexington Park Ward. They have been accepting of us and as usual, as we become acquainted with them, we grow in our love and respect. Each person has an interesting story and most recognize the Lord's goodness and tender mercies to them. Some of their experiences are truly amazing.

Yesterday we visited a sister who lives in an assisted living center. I don't know the nature of her physical ailments other than that she has diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and something else that manifests itself in large open sores on her face. This was our second visit and she was so delighted to see us. She told us that she had been an avid reader and student in her younger years and had graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in economics and history. Following graduation, she had an opportunity to travel abroad and study some of the cultures of the world. This was a rich and rewarding time in her life.

When she returned to the U.S., she enrolled in a Master's program in anthropology but began having problems mentally and didn't finish her degree. She had a good job with the government but soon her mental illness became so troublesome that she lost her job. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder and although she was receiving treatment, she eventually could no longer even care for herself and returned home to live with her parents.

As time passed and her condition persisted, she decided to take her own life. She couldn't see any redeeming traits in herself and could only see that she was a burden to her loved ones. The very day that she planned to take her life two Mormon missionaries knocked on her door and told her that the Lord had a message of hope for her. She was stunned by this seeming coincidence and further amazed that their presence on her doorstep bore witness of another fact: the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth, the almighty and all-knowing Redeemer knew her and cared enough to reach out through these two missionaries and save her! Hope came into her life for the first time in many months and she listened to their message and turned her life around. She wasn't healed of her infirmities but she had a witness of the Lord's love for her and a witness that her life, however damaged, counted for something, and that was enough. Although she has spent most of the last 25 years under psychiatric care and lives a very restricted existence, she has found joy and peace and continues from day to day living her life as best she can.

Another sister we visited is living with her parents who are active in the Church. She had a baby out of wedlock when she was 15 and then another and eventually left home to live with the father of her children. It was a difficult situation from the start but she was committed to giving her children the best life possible. Now after five years of struggling and then finally "coming to herself" she has returned home. She is working part-time, going to school part-time, in the process of getting a divorce, and is trying to put her life back together. She has returned to activity in the Church and with the help of her extended family she is getting through this situation. Although this has been difficult for her parents, they are providing a refuge for her and the two little ones while this process plays out.

This scenario is not uncommon. We see this happening in so many of the families we are working with. It is just another manifestation of the difficulties in our society today. We live in troubled times and even our LDS families are struggling. It is a rare family that hasn't been touched in some way by the ills of modern society. The great thing is that the gospel has the answers and if we support each other, we can find solutions to our trials and difficulties.

It's interesting to me that our extended family goes through stages. One stage was when all of you older kids were getting married. Then we went through the little baby stage when so many of you were having your families. Then there was the college stage when it seemed that everyone was working to finish up their college degrees. Then the teenage stage when we moved out of the baby stage and everyone was getting older. Now we are in the missionary stage. Another stage we're also in is the career path stage. In the last two weeks several of you boys have called and visited with me about your jobs and some of the challenges you are facing and the increasing pressures. It's been interesting to talk through with you your concerns about your work and questions you have, like "What level of stress am I willing to work with," or "Is this how I want to spend the rest of my working years," or "Am I finding a good balance between work and family and Church, " or "What characteristics is my work demanding that I need to develop in my personality." I guess "the honeymoon is over" and as you get more and more into your jobs and have opportunities to advance, these are some of the questions that have to be asked.

Whenever I get one of those phone calls I want to say, "Hold on just a minute and I'll get Daddy", but of course that doesn't work and all I can offer is a listening ear. That is probably all you need anyway since between you and your spouse and the Lord you already get wonderful support and advice.

Speaking of Daddy..........There is a part of the temple film that for whatever reason always reminds me of Daddy or maybe of my future with Daddy. It is the part after the water is divided and the streams and rivers are created and that day of creation is coming to an end. There is a picture of a beach at sunset with the peaceful ocean lapping up against a quiet shore. Every time I see that I think of one day walking hand in hand on that beach with Daddy and just talking about his experiences in heaven while I've been having experiences here on earth. In my mind's eye we are all alone and no pressures or concerns mar the moment and we just walk and talk and share that time together. It fills me with longing for him but also serves as a reminder that if I live worthy, I have a wonderful bright day to look forward to.

In closing let me mention that one of the things Dorinda and I do as we drive back and forth each day from our apartment to the Lexington Park Ward area (an hour’s drive) is to review the names of the people we visit. She is usually driving so I go through the ward list and ask questions such as "What is the name of the sister who is Primary president?" or "Name the Bishop's three children," or "What three sisters live in the trailer park on Planters Court?" This way we review the names and then we can more easily meet and greet them at church and other activities.

Well, last Sunday we had a dinner appointment at the stake Relief Society president's home and as we stood at the front door and knocked, the first response was from Sister Ramon's little white puppy. He stood inside the door and pawed at us through the side windows, barking loudly. We knew the story of how this dog became a member of the Ramon household and so I said to Dorinda, "Now what is the name of that puppy?" Dorinda, without missing a beat replied, "I will learn the names of the sisters, and I am willing to memorize the names of their husbands and their children, but to expect me to learn the names of their dogs is just asking too much!"

It's kind of a trick to make the adjustments needed with each new companionship. Sister Boone is wonderful with the sisters and so willing

to do whatever it takes to help them along. I just learned yesterday that during her last few pregnancies she had problems with blood clots. In fact, her legs would go almost black with the problems she was having. That is why she has trouble sitting for long periods of time and why she has encouraged us to limit our meetings. I knew that she didn't like sitting for long periods but I thought she was just antsy but now I've learned that medically it just isn't good for her so that is going to make a difference as we schedule our weeks. Health issues are definitely an issue with senior missionaries but the wonderful thing is that we have lots of senior missionaries with all kinds of health issues but they have exercised the faith to serve and the Lord and the mission president are willing to let them work within those perimeters.

March 30, 2013

Another week has passed and here we are on the eve of Easter Sunday. Holidays always give me cause for reflection and especially the religious ones of Easter and Christmas. I've used some of my study time this week to reread part of Jesus the Christ by Talmage and I am reminded again of how grateful I am for the Savior and his atoning sacrifice in my behalf. Hopefully each of you have something special planned and will have an enjoyable day.

Stephani mentioned that they drove to Provo to attend Josh's last Men's Chorus concert. Usually that group learns 20+ songs each semester but this semester the director taught them over 40, many which are missionary songs and they were going to make a DVD of those numbers. During the concert one member of the choir was invited to come forward and he had in his hands his unopened mission call. His parents were in the audience and hadn't been told that the call had arrived yet. They were invited to the stage and the choir and audience looked on as this young man opened his call. Stephani said that it was electrifying! After he read the call letter everyone broke into applause. Later Josh told his folks that he got choked up just watching it all and could hardly sing the next number!

I've loved all the stories, Youtube performances, choral numbers and other things that have been happening as a result of this wonderful announcement! Rachel submitted her papers last week so her call is due anytime now! She is living this semester with a cousin on the Benson side and they are both going to serve missions. What fun! It's been fun to talk to the other senior missionaries and learn that they, too, have granddaughters preparing for the mission field.

On a more somber note, one of the senior missionary sisters was diagnosed with cancer and has been taking chemo treatments and is so sick that they can't transport her home to California so her children have been coming out here to see her and say their goodbyes. My heart aches for her and her husband. She told him that she isn't going to do any more chemo. She just wants to go home.

The mission field certainly has its share of drama. Last week a missionary from Belgium who had just recovered from gastric bypass surgery came into the field and didn't tell anyone that he wasn't feeling good. By the time he let the President know, he was deathly ill and part of his intestines were dead from gangrene. His parents flew in from Belgium and were at his side as he battled for life. He is out of the woods now but it was pretty scary!

I thought that I would share some of the experiences we had this week during our visits. One thing that the Suitland Stake Relief Society is focusing on this year is encouraging the sisters to prepare at least four names and do the temple work for them. Last week we composed a letter inviting any of the sisters who are interested to meet with us at the Lexington Park family history library during its regular times and we would help them with this challenge. Sister Boone hasn't done much with family history so she was hesitant to offer to help but I assured her that between the two of us (and the regular staff) that we could do it. We handed out letters last Sunday and already we have had several sisters come forward and talk with us about what they would like to do.

At the knitting class on Wednesday one young black woman brought some of what her mother had given her---page after page of pedigree charts and all the vital information on her ancestors going back through the 1700's! While we were looking over these pages Kari showed us that some of her earliest ancestors in America were slaves on the Lucky Plantation in central Pennsylvania. She said that there were only two main plantations in that state at the time. Another sister (white) came over and she said, "My great, great, grandparents owned the Lucky Plantation!" It was an amazing moment to have this connection come to light!

As we visited further with Kari about her family, we discovered that she and our knitting teacher (they live under the same roof since Kari is the fiance to Mary's son) have both been on Ancestry.com and know that program well and love it. I was interested in this because Mary Pat is just returning to activity in the Church and her services are so needed in the ward. Lexington Park is such a small ward that everyone has several callings but no one is the Family History Consultant. I'm going to mention to the high priest group leader that there are two very talented women in the ward who would be very capable of serving in that position.

Another woman that we had a visit with was the mother of two girls who we've seen at Church but always with someone other than their own family. Well, we got to meet the mother this week and be in their home. They are beautiful girls, ages 12 and 10. Their mother told us that she got married when she was 17 and had her first baby shortly thereafter. She said that the baby died but she didn't go into any detail about the situation. She married the father and they were married for about 15 years before she was able to have another baby and then she got two little girls two years apart. At some point in the last 15 years her husband passed away and Linda struggled to keep house and home together. She joined the Church but has been alienated because she is presently living out of wedlock with a fellow. Linda is paper thin and I wonder if she has aids. She is obviously not well. She told us that she is worried about what will happen to her daughters if she dies. Her deceased husband's family has lots of problems and the girls don't want to go with either of their uncles on that side of the family and the grandmother is very old and unable to care for even herself.

As we talked, she mentioned that her sister might be willing to take them but she lives out of state and it's been a while since Linda was in touch with her. Linda said that if she doesn't designate who the girls are to go to that the state will put them "in the system". We've seen some of "the system" in another situation and it is not a very good thing for the kids most of the time. Anyway, we are going to do some asking around and find out what her options are and encourage her to get this resolved. While we were visiting her a nephew holding a liquor bottle in a brown paper bag dropped in to visit with the boyfriend who was watching TV in a back bedroom.

The black culture seems to be such that many women bear the children, provide for the family, maintain the home, and wear themselves out while the husband (or live-in) just hangs out playing video games and shooting the bull with friends. Every time I see this, I want to strangle someone but this cultural thing runs deep and isn't always easily solved. Anyway, having Linda anywhere but right there at home would create a situation that would be unhealthy for the daughters and we tried to carefully indicate that in what we said. This is a situation that needs attention and we're going to put her on our regular visit list now that we've seen what's happening.

Sometimes when I see the sadness and despair in people's lives I just want to shake them and say, "Wake up! The gospel is what you need and until you live by its precepts you won't find the joy and peace that can be yours." It's hard to see good people with good hearts make poor choices.

April 6, 2013

I've got a few minutes this morning before conference begins and wanted to get this written. The big news of the week, of course, is that Rachel got her mission call! She is leaving August 6th, just a week after she finishes her semester at BYU-I, for Charlotte, North Carolina! Congratulations, Rachel! Other great news is that Katie had an article published on the front page of the A Section of the Deseret News! That's got to be a milestone for a budding journalist! Also, Josh gets to perform with the choir in the Saturday afternoon session of general conference today! I think Tim got to do that, too, as a MTC Choir member but we never did see him although I think we saw his forehead and his chin once, but never his face on the TV monitor! That was a disappointment but hopefully Josh will get better coverage!

I've had a good week with a good variety of activities. Dorinda's daughter and her husband came for a visit Monday and left Wednesday so we did some adjusting for that but it was good medicine for Dorinda. Sometimes when I watch her adjust to mission life I think back at where I was a year ago and it helps me to understand what she is going through. Last year I was very homesick at Easter. It was my first big holiday away from home and I missed having grandkids around and all the little festivities that were usually a part of the holiday.

Last year another missionary couple invited us to dinner and it seemed like such a lifesaver to have

somewhere to go to celebrate. This year wasn't nearly as difficult for me but I could see that she needed family and I was so grateful that her son-in-law had a business trip to the area and it worked out for her daughter to come with him.

We spent Thursday in the temple and had a tender mercy there. We attended the 11:00 session and then decided to stay and go through another session before returning home. Sister Wege, her new companion, Sister Beckes, and one of my favorite black sisters who we took through the temple while I served in Silver Spring, Wanda Thomas, just happened to attend the 1:00 session and it was a joyful reunion! When I was serving in Silver Spring Wanda was just starting to go to the temple and we would take her each week although it meant going a long way out of our way to pick her up and deliver her home. Over the months she went through several trials, including nearly losing her father, persecution from her sisters, her daughter and granddaughter becoming alienated from her, and several health issues. I remember worrying about Wanda and all that she was going through and hoping and praying that things would settle down for her.

Well, Thursday as we visited before the session, she told me of several wonderful miracles that she had received and how her health was continuing to improve, her daughter and granddaughter were back with her, and her little granddaughter just loved to going with her to Church and being in Sunbeams. Wanda's family have been doing better and accepting her choice to be active in the Church and many of her health issues have been resolved. I just marveled at the many tender mercies that Wanda has received through her faithfulness! It is so gratifying to see the promised blessings realized in the lives of the faithful.

One of the sisters we visited yesterday told us about several priesthood blessings which she has received. As a very young mother she injured her back and had to stay with her parents so that her two babies, a newborn and a two-year-old, could be cared for. When it became certain that she was not going to be able to recover without surgery, she scheduled to have the operation. Her husband and father gave her a blessing and she said that as they laid their hands upon her head and pronounced the blessing, she felt a sensation going from the tip of her head down through her body and the pain she had been experiencing for so long was gone. She had such a miraculous recovery that she was able to cancel the surgery and get on with her life. She had six more children and had the health and strength to care for them over the years.

When I hear of miracles (and I hear of them often) it just reaffirms that the Lord's power is on the earth and that He is aware of us and will answer our prayers according to His will. Years ago when I was stake Primary president my counselor, Judy Elison, was in a serious accident and broke her neck. She was fortunate that she wasn't paralyzed by her injuries but she did have to be in traction with what was then called a "halo", a metal circle that surrounded her head which was attached to her head with several screws that were secured with holes drilled into her skull. She laid on a board stretched by wires attached to her feet and the halo at the other end. The nurses rotated her every so often so that she didn't stay too long on her stomach or back. To add to the complexity of this situation, she was pregnant. Fortunately, the baby survived the accident and her recovery. She was in the hospital for about two months until her neck healed and then was permitted to come home with the promise that she wouldn't do anything more strenuous than plucking her eyebrows!

Judy told me of a blessing that she received during this time. She said that as her husband and others placed their hands on her head and pronounced the blessing, she felt a sensation of heat that went down in her head and settled in her neck. She knew that her whole recovery was a miracle and often bore witness of it in future years. Although I have never had this kind of healing in my life, I rejoice with those who have been the beneficiaries of these miracles.

(Afternoon) I just finished listening to the morning session of conference! What beautiful messages! I always love Elder Packer and Elder Ballard. I thought Elder Eyring did a masterful job, too, as did Sister Dalton. She's been such a great champion of virtue during her time as YW President! I felt that President Eyring was making promises to all of us regarding our service in the kingdom. Knowing the rich outpouring of blessings that our family has received since SaraKay and I have been serving has certainly been a witness to me that the Lord is caring for my family in my absence. Several of you have mentioned that in your conversations with me over the last 18 months.

(Evening) Well, I saw Josh singing in conference but never up close. He was given one ticket to

the conference center for the afternoon session and Katie was happy to get to use it! What a wonderful opportunity for Josh and Katie to share!

April 14, 2013

I spent the day in D.C. with a sweet young family, the Vance's. They were very close to my predecessor's here in Waldorf and now that Sisters Brown and Harper are gone, they've befriended us and often call to see if Sister Boone and I would like to come for dinner or go touring with them. The mother, Haleigh, is a gifted violist and was accepted into the music program at Indiana University her freshman year and there met her husband, Mike, who was also studying music. He is in the Army and his sole responsibility is to play in the Army band! He is also serving as the Bishop of the White Plains Ward and they have five children. They are so good to all the missionaries here.

Early this morning when I was getting ready to leave with Haleigh and the kids, I found a note from Dorinda on the table saying that she just needed a day to kick back and asked that I go with Vance's without her. We have freedom to do that so I went companion-less but still had a great time. I had been worried about Haleigh herding all those little kids through the Metro alone and it was the Cherry Blossom Festival today so I knew the crowds would be horrendous. We were going to the White House Garden Tour at which Bishop Vance was performing so Haleigh wanted to take the kids to see their Dad perform one last time since they are probably relocating to St. George later this year. His job playing at many official White House events has become increasingly time consuming and he has decided to try his hand at a different career. Anyway, keeping track of five little ones under the age of 11 was pretty hectic and when I came home, I was tired. But, it's always a treat to get to see another interesting thing going on in the nation's capital.

This time of year, the White House grounds are green and beautiful with plenty of flowering trees. There were literally thousands of visitors yesterday, and everyone was taking pictures and ohhing and ahhing about the beautiful landscaping. Michelle Obama is famous for many things, one of them being the "vegetable garden" that she has growing on the lower area of the grounds. The garden is about 15 raised boxes filled with rich soil in which different things are growing such as corn, beans, cabbage, lettuce, peppers, peas, and so on. These small raised boxes are spotless with not a weed in sight. I'm not sure how much produce these areas produce, but it is a good example to all of us about being resourceful and eating healthy. There was also a bee hive in the vicinity and the volunteer guide said that it produced about 200 pounds of honey a year.

It was a pleasant tour and it felt good to have the weather be warm enough that we enjoyed being out in it. And of course, all us visitors were serenaded by the Army band performing a beautiful variety of songs. They were set up on the circular drive and so most visitors would go right past them as a part of the tour. Bishop Vance's children all sat down on the pavement when we arrived at this point in the self-guided tour and we just stood there and enjoyed the music for about ten minutes. I would have loved to stay longer but the kids were getting restless and we knew we needed to keep moving.

We had zone conference this week, the last one for me. They are always a spiritual feast as well as informative although much of the information doesn't apply to us seniors. It is interesting to sit through the sessions dealing with health, allergies, poison ivy warnings, bedbug infestations, automobile tips, and all the myriad things that young missionaries need to hear (and heed).

The number of sister missionaries in our mission has increased since the age announcement. We have some young sisters who now spend a transfer totally working in the field instead of splitting their time at the Visitor's Center. Hopefully we will see an increase in baptisms with this increased number of missionaries on the streets. In our mission they have called two sister missionaries to be full-time trainers, too, and that is a new development.

One of my favorite things about zone conference is seeing all the young missionaries that I've served with in the various wards. I love renewing those acquaintances and they are always so sweet to me. I try to follow the counsel that President Matsumori gave me when I first arrived. He said that we senior missionaries don't need to baby or necessarily "mother" the young missionaries but that we can play an important role in encouraging them and helping them have a successful mission experience by the way we interact with them.

I watch these young men and women come and go and I remember how I prayed for my own children in the field and so I try to always be encouraging and honestly compliment them on the things I see that they are doing well. I can sometimes see tension in the companionships and if that is the case or if one companion is having an especially difficult time feeling his/her worth, I try to interact in a way that lets them know that with time many of these situations resolve themselves. I have noticed that new missionaries come into the field so pumped and hopeful and pretty soon they begin to look less hopeful and confident. Missions are hard and it takes a while to adjust and get a handle on things. At least I know that was how it was for me and I see it in the faces of the new missionaries, too.

I think I mentioned that I saw one of my dear black sisters in the temple last week. She saw me and wrapped her arms around me and gave me a wonderful hug! I've missed that in the Lexington Park Ward. The members are capable and good and they have treated us well but I don't have the sense of the outpouring of affection from the whites that I get with the black sisters.

I was thinking the other day about a Relief Society testimony meeting that I attended in College Park. One sister was bearing her testimony about her job loss and the strain it had put on her and her marriage. As is often the case in testimony meeting, there were some tears shed. Right in the middle of her testimony my sweet friend, Darlene, stood up, walked to the front of the room and handed the sister some money, and said, "There sister, now you just dry those tears and things are going to get better!" It was such an unexpected response that we were all just sitting there in stunned silence. The lady finished her testimony and the meeting went on. I was thinking the other day about Darlene and her immediate response to a need. Yes, it was a little unorthodox but who can question the love and concern that was behind the act.

I asked President Matsumori during my interview if I could take a day and take some of my College Park sisters to the temple before I leave. He was fine with it. I have loved my opportunity to serve in the temple each week. Despite the traffic and distances, that opportunity continues to strengthen me. Dorinda is so happy for it, too. She has to travel three hours to the nearest temple in Mississippi so to be able to go weekly is such a treat for her!

Well, I'm going to close and do some studying. I've loved the hour-long study period that is a part of a missionary's schedule. The more I study the more grateful I am for the truths of the gospel and for the priesthood power that enables us to enjoy the beautiful ordinances of the gospel throughout our lives. Although I trying not to think too much about my release, I can't help thinking about the upcoming family reunion in July and the opportunity to gather. I can in some small measure understand the Lord's delight in seeing Israel gathered in. I have similar feelings about our reunion and the gathering that takes place for our family at that time. I appreciate all of your efforts to make the reunion a priority and to "move heaven and hell" to be a part of it.

I wanted to mention in closing some upcoming missionary news. First, Jenny's parents will be leaving for the MTC in June and take over the leadership of the Milwaukee Wisconsin Mission that first week of July. Second, Marci's parents have been called to serve in the South Africa area as computer specialists for the missions there and they will be departing early in July. Third, Laurel's parents are putting in papers to serve in the Singapore area where Marilyn's brother is serving as mission president. If I remember right, I think that Andrea's mom is also getting ready to serve another mission. I am so thrilled for each of them and sense that the Work is accelerating. We are so blessed to be a part of this "marvelous work and wonder!" Thanks to each of you who support me with your love and your means. May the Lord continue to bless you for your goodness and sacrifices. Love to all. Mom

April 20, 2013

It's our P-day today and I've cleaned my little corner of the world, submitted my weekly mission report, worked on my scrapbook, fixed lunch, and had my study time. It's nice to have a day when we can just kick back and take care of personal things. We've had a busy week but when we had time we've watched the TV coverage of the Boston Marathon tragedy. Although the town of West, Texas has had an equal or greater tragedy, we haven't seen nearly the emphasis on that situation. The eyes of the nation have been focused on Boston. Maybe it's because this kind of thing reminds us of how vulnerable we all are. It's such a frightening thing to see how easily our lives can come under attack. My heart aches for everyone concerned. I thought that the story of the younger brother's capture was especially poignant. From what I gathered, he was injured

with gunshot wounds in both the neck and the leg and yet somehow got himself hidden in a boat in someone's back yard and there sat out a lot of hours. One can only imagine the pain and anguish he suffered knowing that his older brother was dead, his lifeblood was ebbing away, and his bright potential squandered.

The news reported that when the fellow who owned the boat called 911 that the images the police were getting from the boat showed that he was alive but very lethargic. They figured the loss of blood was the reason. Anyway, it's a sad, sad affair from top to bottom and although the news touted the "Capture" as a victory, in this kind of a situation there really are no winners.

In my study this past week I have been reading from an institute manual for Religion 121-122. It has been wonderful to expand my understanding of the Book of Mormon with the teachings of past and present modern-day prophets. In one of the quotes by President Oaks it reads: "For now we have wars and conflicts and everywhere they are rooted in violations of the commandments of God". I really believe that our best defense as well as our best contribution to establishing peace is to do our share towards building righteousness in the lives of people everywhere. I guess that as I go about my missionary efforts and some days wonder if my "mite" in this great latter-day work is doing any good, I just remind myself that teaching the gospel of peace is a great contribution to saving this world and that each of us whether we are giving service as mothers and fathers, serving in the Church, strengthening our communities, supporting the missionary program, or paying of tithes and offerings, is doing an important thing towards establishing Zion.

We met an interesting fellow yesterday. Our normal day consists of scheduled appointments with active sisters and unscheduled visits with less actives. We've found (through sad experience) that those who are less active will usually avoid us if they are alerted that we are coming. If we can arrive unannounced, they are curious and answer the door and we at least get a few minutes on the doorstep to either find out a few details of their lives or to be told that they do not want any contact with the Church; period! As you can imagine, these less-active visits fill us with a bit of trepidation but sometimes they are the source of wonderful experiences. Such was the case yesterday.

We were traveling the country roads and byways of southern Maryland and enjoying the beauty all around us. Spring in Maryland is wonderful! The flowering bushes and trees make the area a Garden of Eden in many respects. One of the families we found on our area map (lds.org/maps) lived right down on the Chesapeake Bay and since we had another appointment in the area we decided to knock on this door while we were close. The home was built like a short lighthouse and out front was an eight-foot-tall tile mosaic of the crucified Christ. Although we saw a "No Trespassing" sign, we didn't see a "Beware of Dog" sign so we braved it and knocked on the door. A male voice yelled, "Come in" but we waited until a short, stocky fellow came to the door and invited us in. We told him that we were sister missionaries and that we were visiting in the area and had come to get acquainted with his wife. He responded that she died two years earlier but that we could visit with him. We followed him to the back of the house and sat at a dining room table that overlooked the Bay. His home was about 25 yards from the Chesapeake! What a beautiful, peaceful setting!

Well, for the next hour and a half he regaled us with stories of his adventures in the military and of caring for his wife who had cancer as a result of serving in the Persian Gulf War. She, like many veterans of that war, contracted cancer and battled it for 15 years. He was her constant companion and even refused an advancement to a Brigadier General because he wanted to care for her. He eventually served as secretary and liaison to the Secretary of Defense and upon retirement had to sign a statement that he would at no time publish his memoirs.

His home was full of wonderful artifacts of their life together including pictures and tile mosaics that he had created. He showed us pictures of them and their many military medals of honor. It was a treat for us to get acquainted. Eventually we asked about his conversion to the LDS Church. He joined years ago while stationed in Alaska when he was going through a very difficult and lonely time but had never really grabbed onto the gospel nor been active in the Church. He later married and his wife was Catholic and since they never had children and neither was active in their respective religions, it was a non-issue.

He has been a widower now for three years and has retired from the service and pretty much spends his time doing whatever he pleases. We challenged him to get reacquainted with the LDS

Church. He said that he still had his Book of Mormon so we asked him to spend some time each day reading it and praying about it. We suggested that chances were good that his wife was being taught the gospel in the spirit world and that she would approve of him doing the same here.

When we asked him if he was a praying man he said that he sometimes talks to God in his mind but we asked him to kneel and address the Lord in a more formal setting. We're not sure what he will or won't do but he invited us back and told us that if we wanted to bring anyone from the Church with us, he would show them around, too. We are going to asked the full-time Elders to go with us and see if we can touch his life with the truths of the gospel. We'll see how it goes. Both Dorinda and I felt that he is a pretty lonely guy and enjoyed the chance to share a visit with us.

Another fun event we participated in was to work with the Activity Girls and to help them learn to get on FamilySearch. We spend Tuesday mornings at the family history library anyway because we offered to help the sisters with their family history if they needed us. Well, the activity day leader requested our help with the 10–11-year-old girls and so we prepared a handout and worked with them for about an hour. Eventually we called Salt Lake because we were having trouble get them registered.

Monday I spent several hours with a woman in my last area who I had promised that I would help. She has major health issues and finally she got feeling well enough that she called to see when I could come. Well, we met, we got her into the site and we prepared the cards that she has been worrying about. I still am not very good at all the stuff. The Church's site is constantly changing and it's a trick to keep pace. The help desk can go onto a "join me" site and they can see your private computer screen and drive the mouse to show you how to go from one thing to another. Steve (son) has often used the "join.me" site when I call with a problem.

I appreciate the phone calls, photos, and family letters that I receive each week. It was sweet to get pictures of Rachel in front of the Logan Temple with her parents and Stephani the day she went through for her endowments. Time marches on and soon these prospective missionaries will be in the field and SaraKay and I will be completing our time as missionaries. It doesn't seem possible. Hope that life is sweet for all of you and that you know you are prayed for each day. When I go to the temple each week, I put one person from each family on the prayer roll and even though I'm a single sister I usually participate in the prayer circle. I know that the Lord hears and answers prayers; I'm so grateful for His many tender mercies.

April 4, 2013

I've been thinking about all of you kids and what you are doing right now. About Steph and Andrea and Bonnie finding time to get missionary shopping done, about moving college kids home and finding room for their paraphernalia and making the adjustment to having them join the family circle again. I've also been thinking about Jeff job hunting and about Steve starting a new job and all the uncertainty of how it is going to work out for him. I've thought about Mike and Marci and the decisions they are making and about Marci's parents taking off for Africa. I've imagined that Camille, Maddie and Emma (and Jenny) are looking forward (as are their parents) to sleeping in until 6:30 once early morning seminary is over. I've thought about how hectic school is that last month and about all the wind-up parties and field trips and senior events (yah! Anna) that run you ragged! I've had my yard on my mind a little, too, as we stopped at an Amish market yesterday on our way home and they had some absolutely gorgeous hanging plants for sale. The ward did a service project for me on Tuesday and raked up the winter mess and cleaned up around my place. I guess it's time to come home and not be so dependent on friends and neighbors!

Yesterday we helped a woman do some packing and cleaning in preparation for a move. This lady lives on the far southern tip of Maryland where the Potomac River merges with the Chesapeake Bay. The island she lives on is about 1/4 mile wide; you can stand on her front porch and see the Potomac on one side and the Chesapeake on the other! It is so absolutely gorgeous that it takes your breath away! Following our service project, we made a side trip and visited an old lighthouse that has been around since Civil War times. Maryland has 17 lighthouses and the major industry of the area used to be fishing, clamming, and other things associated with the Bay. We visited a small museum near the lighthouse and a maritime museum that had some of the boats that are used by the "watermen" who work the Bay and take their livelihood from its waters.

As we were driving through the area with all the large beach houses, private beaches, boat docks, sail and motor boats, and other recreation vehicles we wondered how it would be to live that lifestyle. It's easy to imagine that living in such luxury would be idyllic. About 11 we arrived at the home of this sweet sister and began to assist her with the packing and cleaning. As we worked we visited and although we hadn't known her very well before, it didn't take long to realize that although the setting on the Bay was idyllic, the circumstances of her life were anything but and that she had her trials just the same as the rest of us do.

Several years ago, her husband hired on to work for one of the government contractors who are the chief employers in the area along with the U.S. Military. They moved from California where they had lived for several years. They bought their home on St. Georges Island and life moved along pleasantly. Then within a few months everything began to unravel for them. She fell off of a ladder and seriously injured her leg. It involved several surgeries to get the break repaired and she was barely able to function and get around for six months. Of course, this complicated her work and eventually they let her go. Their mortgage was dependent upon two incomes and losing her job created a terrible hardship on them. Then her husband had a heart attack and was so laid up that he had to go on disability and lost his job. Now they were without both incomes and they began using up their savings and even some retirement funds to stay afloat.

About this time their son returned from Afghanistan suffering with post-traumatic stress syndrome and needed a lot of care and attention. He quit attending church and married a nonmember who has no interest in it. In the meantime, with her and her husband both relatively laid up the improvements and repairs on the house didn't get done and they were hesitant to put it on the market with so many things undone. The Elders and high priests offered some manpower and the sisters were helping with packing and cleaning. Hopefully they can get their home sold without taking too much of a loss on it. They are planning on living in their motor home until things turn around for them. The downsizing that they are being forced to do was something she thought she would be doing 20 years from now, but the circumstances have forced it upon them prematurely.

By the time we had worked and talked through her situation, I felt like I was the one with the idyllic life. Both Sister Boone and I commented as we left for home that we were so fortunate. We have active families, a roof over our heads, and good health. I was reminded that life was meant to be difficult and that although it may appear that some individuals have it made, no one's life is perfect.

On Thursday we attended the temple and then had a luncheon at the other sisters' apartment. Sister Divine has now replaced Sister Wege and I'm the only veteran in the bunch. As we visited about our duties Sister Beckes who served with Sister Wege for a while asked our district leader about some ideas for fulfilling her calling. Elder Knight told her, "You just figure it out and do it the way it works best for you." I was grateful for that advice. I think that Sister Boone has some ideas about things that she would like to incorporate when I leave and I'm happy to see her take the reins and move forward with what works for her and Sister Hatch who will replace me. President Matsumori has given us a lot of freedom and it’s been a pleasure to feel our way through and follow the Spirit about how and what we spend our time doing. I'm impressed with these new sisters and know that they will be an asset in the wards they serve.

Best close and fix myself some supper. I walked outside this afternoon around a little man-made lake in this subdivision. There were ducks and geese and two beautiful blue herons and lots of little goslings swimming in a line behind their parents. They are all yellow and fuzzy and as cute as can be! It's beautiful today. I have the windows open and I can hear the birds and the sounds of people and traffic. There on people on bikes and joggers on the trail around the lake and families coming and going and enjoying the wonderful sunshine. I got my suitcases out today and put them against the wall and started putting things in. I'm trying not to get over anxious but there does need to be some prior planning if I am going to fit into these three suitcases. Best run. Mom

May 4, 2013

I'm sitting in the middle of a mess right now. There are suitcases against the wall, piles for D.I. (or Value Village), a pile for a little family we are working with, boxes with heavy books to be mailed Priority Mail, and piles of binders and papers that also need to be packed. I've tried not to get

trunky but I guess it's time to figure out how I'm going to get this accumulation packed into three suitcases. Dorinda is asking questions and keeping a list of things that she needs to know when I leave her. She is very independent and although she will be working alone for about a month, she doesn't seem too concerned about it. She says she is accustomed to being alone, but she lives very close in Mississippi to five of her 10 children so I know that she doesn't have much of a chance to get very lonely back home.

Her new companion will arrive in June. It's nice that we've gotten acquainted with a lot of ward members and she can recruit some of the sisters to do visiting with her if she needs to. We've tried to tract out the sisters who live in the far southern reaches of the ward so that she doesn't have to go into the back woods looking for members. I've always heard that Idahoans love their space but they have nothing over on these Marylanders. They build their homes in the wooded areas next to some water and enjoy the isolation and ready access to the recreation in the area.

I am amazed at the size of the rivers and of the Chesapeake Bay. The Potomac is huge and looks more like one of the Great Lakes than like a river. It just doesn't seem fair that this part of the country can have such an abundance of waterways and we have so few back west. And then there is the whole thing about adequate rainfall so that no one has to worry about irrigating. The Lord just takes care of it. True, they don't have the thick lawns like we do in Idaho but most years everything is green and lush. The battle here is to fight back the trees and vegetation from taking over; In Idaho if we don't plant it, water it, talk to it, and yes, pray over it, it won't survive! Maybe that's why the Lord needed the saints in the wilderness; they have the vision and persistence to make it blossom.

We had a wonderful day in the temple on Thursday. We usually get into the 11:00 and 1:00 sessions and then head home. Our temple day has become the highlight of our week. The temple itself is such a symbol in this area of the Church and is highly visible on the D.C. Beltway. I've grown to love the workers and their kind consideration of me each time I go. They often ask about what Sister Boone and I are doing down in southern Maryland. I just tell them that we're pounding the sidewalk and working the streets. I should include "beating the brush" because sometimes that is what we feel like we are doing.

The other day we hunted for a family that has been totally inactive for years. There were three adult women listed on the roster but no ages so we weren't sure just what we were getting into but the further back in the woods we drove, the scarier it got. We finally ended up on a dirt road in a sparsely populated area. The address we were hunting finally came into view. It was a ramshackle place with stuff scattered all over and several vehicles in the yard. We noticed a "No Trespassing" sign posted on a shed in the back and a "Beware of Dog" sign posted on the front porch. But, we had driven too many miles to come so far and turn around without at least finding out if this truly was the Jimmette residence. So, since we didn't see any Doberman Pincer tugging at a leash, we ventured out and onto the front porch. The minute we knocked several dogs inside started barking and then we could hear a woman yelling. We couldn't tell what she said but we assumed that she was yelling at the dogs and not us. When things got a little quieter, we knocked again. No one came to the door. We waited a reasonable amount of time but still no response so we returned to our car.

As we drove back to the main highway Dorinda let off some steam. "If they don't want to be a part of this Church, why did they join it in the first place? Why don't they have the decency to at least answer the door and say, "Thanks, but no thanks." We agreed that it was frustrating for the ward to carry all these less actives for years when they had long ago lost interest. We decided that we ought to come up with a new door approach that went something like the home teacher in the movie, 'The RM." The home teacher knocks and no one answers so he peeks through the letter drop in the door and says, "I see you in there. You can't hide from me". Then if they don't answer we could yell through the door, "Hey you, we didn't want you in our Church anyway so just go ahead and drop out of sight! Who cares!!" By the time we had vented, we were both laughing. The truth of the matter is that if we can once meet these less- active members we almost always have an immediate feeling of love and compassion for them and recognize their great worth. We recognize it is our privilege to be a part of their lives.

I don't know if I've mentioned that Dorinda is the whiz kid when it comes to cars. We spend about 5-6 hours a day in our car, going here and there or sitting in traffic, inching along. On these occasions Dorinda will give a running commentary

on all the cars around us. Now I would identify them by saying, “There is a red one, and there is a black one, or that one has fancy hub caps,” etc. but Dorinda (whose brother was a mechanic) grew up knowing the names of all kinds of cars, their various models such as for Toyota there is the Tercel, the Camry, and the Avalon. This doesn't take into consideration that they also have a tiny little one called Yaris or a rather small one called the Prius or a hummer-like one that I can't remember the name of. She also knows the year of the car and whether it has good resale value. She knows what colors resale best and what years major changes in the body shape took place so that buying a used one is cheaper.

Yesterday we pulled into a gas station and I noticed a car that was about the oldest Toyota that I had ever seen. I commented on it and Dorinda told me the year and that her family had owned one once and named it Rosie. It was a 1996 and had little resemblance to the ones we see on the roads today. Dorinda is especially tuned in to the expensive ones like the BMW's and Audi's and yesterday she pointed one out to me that was a very classy Lincoln pickup that comes in gradated colors. Just thought I'd mention that interesting bit of trivia. It always catches me off guard when she starts talking about cars like I'd talk about sugar cookie recipes.

In closing just let me say that I'm using my family history knowledge, which is limited, to get us in doors and to give us something we can chat about with these less active sisters that we are working with. It's interesting that although some people resist the missionaries, most people are anxious to know about their family lines and so we have used this to give us another excuse to engage them in conversation and even schedule visits to show them how the program works.

FamilySearch has no limitations on who can get on and register so we did that with one of our sisters this week. She is Italian and Catholic and is taking the discussions with the full-time Elders but was resisting so we decided to try the genealogy approach. I had heard that the Italian government has requested that the Church help them digitize all of their records and the Church is requesting anyone speaking Italian to help with this huge project. Since Claudia is Italian and very bright and her husband served his mission in Italy, I immediately thought of them. So we made an appointment to ask Claudia if she would consider working at Indexing. Of course, her first response was, "Are there deadlines or do I have to meet a quota or will it cost me anything. We answered, "No, no, and no." She was willing so we sat with her at her laptop and got her registered. She pulled up the Italian project and there were all kinds of cities and areas to index. She immediately found her own home town and with excitement said, "This is where I'll start. I probably will know some of these names!" Mission accomplished! Family history is a great missionary tool and one that all of the younger missionaries are being trained in so they can utilize it, too.

May 11, 2013

Today we received a phone call from the military fellow who I mentioned in my letter several weeks ago. We made the mistake of not getting his phone number when we were at his home the first time and so we were really frustrated with having no way to reach him since the number in the roster was wrong. We tried to get his number on the internet but that number was disconnected. Finally, I decided to write him a short note expressing our desire to meet with him and to bring the full-time Elders to teach him the new member discussions. I also requested that he call and give us his current number since we had no way of contacting him. Well, no response (which is very typical). On Monday we were in the area and decided to just drop in. We could see that his vehicle wasn't there so Dorinda took a note to leave letting him know that we had dropped by. What a surprise when Jim's nephew answered the door and told her that Jim was gone for two weeks. But he gave us the phone number and said that he would give him the note.

Well, how surprised we were to get a call today from him saying that he was home from his trip now and would be willing to meet with us and the full time Elders this week. He thanked us for the nice note and said that he thought it deserved a response. He said that he hadn't been to Church in so long that he didn't really know what the Mormons believed and so he was willing to take the new member lessons! It really made our day!

We had several other tender mercies that happened as well. One family who no one in the ward knows has four grown children living in the area and a mother and father who are divorced. We dropped by to see if we could get some information and just happened to meet the father of the family. He has removed himself from Church activity for the last 10 years saying that he decided Mormonism wasn't for him but he wanted his kids to make their own choice so he gave us

their addresses, phone numbers, and visited with us like we were old friends. We have followed up on several of the kids and discovered that one is active in a neighboring ward, and another has recently moved into our ward and they have a new baby. We got forwarding addresses for the mother and two younger children who live in another ward and so hopefully we can get them transferred to the ward where they live. It was such a delightful visit with the fellow and we hoped that we left a favorable impression. We thanked him for being so kind and reaffirmed that the Church was true and that he and his new wife and son would be more than welcome if they wanted to return. He declined but the whole exchange was very positive and productive in terms of locating this family and getting the proper information in the hands of the three wards involved.

I am so grateful that we are able to serve the ward in this way. Most of these people that we are seeing are not even known by the ward leadership. Sometimes the individuals have felt so removed that they become bitter but no one knows that they have been offended. The more time that passes the more offended they become. Then we show up on their doorstep and show some concern and some of them warm to us, some complain, and some just want to be left alone. At least they know that the Church is reaching out to them and in some ways it puts the burden back on them to either respond or reject the hand of fellowshipping that we are offering. It helps sometimes, too, that we are new to the area and not aware of all the baggage that these people carry and that keeps them from activity. With all of the Church members praying for us missionaries, it can't help but soften some hearts and lead us to the homes of those who have been prepared..

On Wednesday we visited with a little 75-year-old woman who suffers from paranoia. She is faithful in attending Church each week but she is Vietnamese and speaks with a strong accent so she is very difficult to understand. She always brings a roll-away suitcase with her and has on several layers of clothing, none which are appropriate for Church. She has taken a liking to me and so I sit with her in the investigator class and in Relief Society.

When we visited her this week we were apprehensive about the home situation and it was as bad or worse than we expected. She has the "Hoarder" mental illness and there was hardly room for us to squeeze in the front door and sit on a couch. Once we got seated Rosie began telling us a tale of woe that began with the Vietnam War and went down through the years. She married a white man from the U.S. and for a while he stayed in Vietnam after the war and she had three children by him. When he decided to bring them home to the U.S. she discovered that his family had major problems including abuse and she did all she could to protect her children which resulted in her becoming alienated from his family. Most of her family were lost during the Vietnam War so she has been quite alone for many years. Even her own children no longer come to visit. She practices some voodoo and claims to have the gift of healing. She brings all her clothes with her to Church because she thinks her neighbors like to get in her house and steal her things. This mental illness is similar to another lady that Sister Wege and I taught in Silver Springs. She always felt that everyone was out to get her.

By the time we sat through nearly an hour of her narrative we extricated ourselves from the situation. She was so happy that we would come and genuinely appreciated our kindness in visiting her. It is a sad situation and the ward continues to help out however they can.

I tell you this story because I have learned since being in the mission field, especially in an area that is so full of diversity and has so many immigrants, that the cost of war is not all paid by the fallen and wounded soldiers and the Department of Defense. I have met many women whose families were decimated by the Vietnam War and who, like Rosie, have been terribly damaged by the horrors and hardships suffered. When I have come across these situations I think about how fortunate I have been to have raised my family in a time of peace and plenty and in an area where people are good and for the most part, law abiding. I can't help but think of my Grandma Gooch whose several sons went off to the Second World Ward and some of them returned so affected by it that they lost their testimonies. I'm sure that the Lord is aware of all the facts and will be able to judge righteously but as a mother, it would be so heartbreaking.

This week we spent our usual time in the temple. One thing that is different from other temples that I have attended is that in the D.C. Temple a member of the presidency comes in just before the session begins and welcomes us and gives a spiritual thought. This week President

Pratt welcomed us and commented that he doesn't usually mention his family but that he wanted us to know that he and his wife have eight children and they have had their share of problems. He said that one thing he does when one of his kids acts up is to sit them down and review with them the plan of salvation. He did this because he wanted them to see the importance of their choices in the big picture. He said that lately he has been thinking that that is what the Lord does with us. We struggle in life and each time we attend an endowment session we are reminded of the "big picture" and hopefully influenced to make choices that will bring us joy for eternity. I thought that was a good thought. I love the temple! I have been so grateful for this weekly time to attend. Just another of the Washington D.C.North Mission perks!

May 27, 2013

I'm sitting up here in Joseph's bedroom trying to sneak a couple of minutes before we all leave for Laurel's farewell. It has been a whirlwind week for me with visits to Steph and Linds, Steve and Bonnie's, Mike and Marci's, Tim's, and now Dave and Andrea's. It has been a wonderful week and so nice to have time with the kids and grandkids and hear about their activities of the last 18 months.

Steph and Steve and their families made a fuss at the airport. I was in missionary attire during my flights from D.C. although I didn't wear my missionary tag (President Matsumori's request). On my flight from Atlanta to SLC I saw Jake Hansen (Zac's brother) and his wife, Corey and it was fun to tell them that I was returning from my time in D.C. Later they exited the plane before me and when they got to the bottom of the escalator, they saw my group with a large welcome home poster and told them that I was not far behind. Sure enough, when I rounded the corner to get on the escalator, I heard "Grandma" and knew that I had been spotted. What fun! Steve and his five and Steph, Linds, Josh and Katie were all there as well as my sister, Kathy, who has been such a support to me throughout my mission.

After that warm welcome we had a pizza party at a restaurant in Bountiful and then I went home with the Bennions to enjoy an evening with them. It was fun showing them some of my mission pictures and talking over my experiences. Sam was noticeably absent. He and a former missionary companion went on a mission tour back to Washington/Tacoma for the weekend and so I arranged my schedule to return on Monday afternoon when he was due to arrive home.

Some of you may be aware that Steph and Linds are interested in adopting two sisters (ages 12 and 10) who I worked with in the Lexington Park Ward. Their mother is dying of congestive heart failure and I was trying to line her up with a woman in our community who has adopted other Afro/American children when Stephani expressed an interest. We have been in contact with the mother, Linda, and she is trying to do the necessary paper work to facilitate the adoption. Steph and Linds and I will be flying back to D.C. area to meet with Linda and her daughters to see if everyone thinks the girls would be compatible.

Sunday I spent the day with Steve and Bonnie and their family. They have been very busy getting their house ready to sale. They have already done a lot of packing and have a realtor who is working with them. They showed me their new location and their new home which is in the early stages and is supposed to be completed by the end of July. They are all very excited about it and grateful that they will be able to stay in the same school district and keep many of their same friends. Later Sunday night we drove Rachel to a truck stop where she met her Funk cousins who gave her a ride back to Rexburg. She admitted that right now she is having a difficult time focusing on finishing up her semester when she knows that she will soon be in the mission field.

Monday, I returned to Steph's and we went to Tremonton to pick up Sam who was due to arrive there. He and his friend and two young women who were missionaries in their mission as well as a chaperoning couple arrived in a large touring bus that was complete with bedrooms, and kitchen. They all looked like they had a great time! This was my first time seeing Sam since his mission and Monday night we went through a lot of his pictures and talked missions for a long time.

Tuesday morning, I spent the time organizing my belongings and Linds and I had a great visit. Steph, Sam, and Josh were at work. Usually there is so much going on when I visit that I rarely get one on one time but it felt good and I was reminded again of what great daughter and sons-in-law we have in this family!

Tuesday afternoon it was back to Wellsville. It was fun to be a part of the family as kids came and went. These times and the pace of life

highlight how different my life is now than it was a few years ago. Chrissy gave me a private recital on her cello and the piano and I was all set to hear from Anne Marie when we realized that since school was almost over all of the rented instruments had been returned and we were minus a violin. Jared showed me a video of him playing his violin riding his unicycle for a school talent show!

Wednesday I drove to Burley and was met at the front door by three munchkins! Tanner, who was only a couple of months old when I left on my mission, was right in step with Ellie and Olivia. It was wonderful to see them again although Tanner was pretty skeptical of me for a long time. I loved the chance to interact with the kids and we went on stroller rides, played on the trampoline and slide and swing set. I tried to give Marci a break from her hectic daily regimen but even with an extra set of hands, we were both running to keep up. Amber finished up first grade on Friday and Marci decorated the front door with balloons and a sign. Next year Ellie will be in kindergarten and Olivia starting preschool. Time marches on! Mike and Marci have some big decisions ahead now that his commitment to the public dental clinic is nearly over.

Friday afternoon I drove to Tim's and he took me to dinner at a wonderful Thai restaurant. It gave us some good visiting time. He invited me to watch his tennis match on Saturday. It was fun to be a part of that. I not only watched his match but met his tennis team mates who came to watch his match. They were all so kind to me and went out of their way to talk with me and tell me how much they enjoyed Tim as both a friend and competitor. It was fun to be a part of Tim's life for a few hours. He won his match but only after each of them won a set and they had a play-off. I was really impressed with Tim and his athleticism.

Later Friday night I arrived at Dave and Andrea's. The little ones were in bed so we had some quiet visiting time before we got into the busy Saturday of preparation for Laurel's farewell. They had carefully groomed the yard and everything looked spiffy. Saturday morning Andrea talked through what needed to be done and with everyone working together the rest of the preparations and shopping were completed. We set up tables and chairs in the back yard, weeded the raspberry patch, sprayed for wasps, and did all those other little things that need to be done when you're entertaining. Soon Andrea's mom and sister arrived from Provo and we spent several hours cooking, slicing and dicing, and preparing the meal for Sunday. Andrea's sister, Lisa, was so organized and capable and every detail accounted for. Andrea's mother and I just gladly followed directions.

(Sunday) Laurel's talk and the dinner following were wonderful. Steph, Linds, Katie, Sam, Tim, Steve and his five came to show support. There was a huge crowd of family and friends and I think Dave and Andrea were very happy with how things turned out. Laurel's boyfriend, Spencer Brown, has also been here for the weekend and he was good to lend a hand and roll with all the preparations and festivities. It was nice for me to reconnect with Laurel Cottom. She has recently received her call to the Chicago mission doing the same kind of a mission that I did in D.C. and so we've spent some time talking about my experiences and advice that I had for her. She has already served one mission so this is her second. She is very capable and dedicated-- a lovely lady!

Tomorrow is Memorial Day and I won't be home to decorate Dad's grave. I'm sorry to be so close yet so far away. I know Daddy would understand, though, and I really need to do the things that are pressing right now and then return home. Anna Sue's graduation is on Wednesday and Laurel flies out for the Guatemala MTC on Tuesday so I'll drive home on Thursday. Steph is planning to meet me at the house and help me. I really appreciate that. I'm already worrying about the adjustment. The Hanni's called and told me that my pump for my domestic well has some problems and I'm trying to address that so it can be fixed by the time I arrive home. I just need to take this a day at a time and trust that everything will be okay.

Steve and kids were going to stay until tomorrow and celebrate the holiday with us here at Dave and Andrea's but he received a call from Bonnie. She has been sick the last couple of days and she went in to the emergency room this afternoon with a lot of pain. He and the kids made a hasty exit and later he called to tell me that she has been diagnosed with diverticulitis and that she has some growths around her ovaries that need to be removed. There is a procedure that they can do that will sometimes work but if it doesn't then she will need surgery. Either way she will need to be hospitalized for a few days until something is resolved. Remember her in your prayers.

I know that Becky and Jeff could use your prayers too as they make the move in a few weeks from China. Jeff has several job leads but as yet nothing has come through for him so please remember them.

I thought in closing that I would mention two tender mercies that happened my last few days in D.C. A lady who I worked with in the College Park Ward, Darlene Seldon, was one of my favorite people on my mission. She went through the temple several months ago and we would take her regularly when I was serving in that area, but since I have been gone for nine months I haven't had any interaction. I would have loved to visit my old area before returning home but since I didn't have my own car, I didn't feel like I could ask Dorinda to take me to see her. I wrote Darlene a letter giving her my contact information but I just felt sorry to leave without saying good-bye. Well, we usually go to the temple on Thursdays but that week I felt that I needed to go earlier in the week since I was flying out on Saturday so we went on Tuesday. As I went into the endowment room and sat down I was surprised to see the other senior sisters there, too, since their regular day is Thursday. As I looked down the aisle who should I see but sweet Darlene, smiling back at me and looking beautiful in white! Somehow it had all worked out for Darlene to be there on that particular day in that particular session so I could give her a hug and say "good-bye".

The second tender mercy was equally amazing. As I packed and prepared for my departure, I could see that I wasn't going to fit in my three suitcases so I boxed up three boxes of heavy stuff and mailed them. Friday night as I completed all my packing, I was still on overload but I just kept organizing until I got everything in and within the weight limit. With the airlines now you pay for every bag so I knew that I was going to owe about $60 for baggage so in order to keep that cost down I had a carry-on suitcase as well as my big missionary bag. I realized that even putting the big bag on the roll-away carry-on, it was very heavy and difficult to manage. How in the world was I going to lift my carry-on into the overhead bins once I boarded the plane? I prayed Friday night that I would meet some buff big-hearted guy who would ask if he could assist me. I realized that since I had a layover in Atlanta that I was going to need two buff, big-hearted guys, one in D.C. and one in Atlanta.

Anyway, to make this story short, as I was walking down the ramp to the plane the stewardess stopped the woman in front of me and said that the overhead bins were all full and that the airlines would ship our carry-ons free of charge. So, my carry-on was taken and sent to SLC and I was saved the task of muscling it in and out of overhead bins. It was such a relief and an unexpected answer to my prayer.

I'm grateful for the Lord's many blessings to me and to each of you children. We are not without our problems but hopefully we can take our concerns to the Lord and live to receive His promised blessings. I love each of you and am proud of you and your lives of goodness. May you continue in the faith. Mom

June 5, 2013

This letter is going to be very scattered and rushed. I'm waiting for a Dish representative to come hook up my TV's and I'm scheduled to leave for Logan later this afternoon. I am still needing a plumber but he finally returned my call and will come on Tuesday. I think that is the last of the things that I've needed to do to resume my life as a civilian. Although this past week has been harried, it has been much better than I expected thanks to the members of my ward who truly went the extra mile in preparing for my return. Throughout my absence I knew that the YM under the capable leadership of Richard Tominaga were keeping things raked and cleaned up but what I didn't know was that the Relief Society sisters came over and dusted and vacuumed and the YW cleaned my windows! I was so grateful for Reed and Melanie orchestrating this and for all that the Ellis's did to help throughout my mission.

When I arrived on Thursday about noon, Melanie and Stephani were standing in the driveway visiting. It was a sweet and welcomed sight and when Melanie showed me what the ward had done, I was so grateful. Stephani stayed until Friday about noon and helped me get my suitcases unpacked and things back in order. It feels so good to be home! Sunday I was feeling a little awkward at church but relationships take time and right now I'm feeling more at home in Lexington Park than I am here. It will come, I'm sure. The rest of the time I have done some yard work, weeded around the foundation of the house, cleaned out around the apple trees, got my internet hooked up, and began to stock my frig.

When I was working in the yard, I had several ladies stop to say hello and visit. There were several other people who I wanted to visit, too, so

Sunday night I visited Ben Hansen, who has undergone treatment for cancer in his jaw and lymph nodes, Denice Chadwick, whose husband passed away, and Steve Reader who had an accident and was so badly broken and bruised that he spent several weeks in a care center for treatment and therapy. It was nice to finally get to sit down with them and have a good visit. I've tried to see Shelly Young but she hasn't been home much so I'll catch her when I get back next week.

Steph and Linds and I are flying to D.C. tomorrow to meet the Atkins girls and their mother. We have been on the phone a great deal lining up meetings with the case worker, the lawyer, the member of the bishopric, other individuals who are interested in adopting the girls, and Sister Boone. We want to get everything accomplished that we are going for so that we can in a sense put the matter to rest and let it play out. Along with visiting and taking care of business with Linda Atkins, we are going to see my mission apartment, tour the monuments and the Holocaust Museum in D.C., visit the Washington D.C. Temple Visitor's Center, attend the College Park Ward, and then fly back Sunday night. We recognize that there are many factors to consider before this adoption may take place but our fasting and prayers have been that Steph and Linds will be able to discern if this is right for them. We'll keep touch on that.

My time with each of the children was complete when I attended Anna Sue's graduation. She has certainly distinguished herself with her top grades and full docket of activities including a lead role in their school musical. She is settling in now for the summer and is enrolled at BYU-Provo for fall. Andrea and David are sure going to miss her but she's excited and ready to take on the world! News from Laurel in Guatemala has been short and sweet. Hopefully this week she will send a full letter and we'll hear how she's weathering her adjustment.

Bonnie will be contacting each of you regarding Rachel's homecoming. She knows that everyone has other family that need visiting, too, so she wants to keep the homecoming separate from our reunion plans. Let her know your plans. I have reserved the Bountiful Temple baptistery for July 13th at 7:00 with baptisms at 7:30. We need three priesthood holders and two women to help in baptistery and the rest of us can go through a session. The Lodge is reserved and Sunday at three is check-in. More on that later. I am leaving today and will return on Monday afternoon. I'll have my cell phone on me so you can reach me that way if needs be. SaraKay flies in on the 18th. Homecoming at 11:00 on the 23rd with a dinner here at the house following. Know that any of the extended family who are planning to come are so welcome and we'll love seeing you. I'm requesting everyone bring a salad or dessert to help with the meal.

June 15, 2013

On Wednesday I had a fellow come spray and fertilize the lawn. Just a few hours later a rain storm moved in and it rained for the rest of the day. I'm afraid that the weedkiller probably got diluted with the rain. I sprayed the driveway that morning with KillZall but didn't do the whole front area when I saw storm clouds on the horizon. Things are looking better each day and hopefully we'll have some sunny weather before too long and I can finish up the spraying. Right now all I've got on my mind is getting SaraKay home and getting things ready for the homecoming weekend.

My time with Stephani and Linds was very enjoyable. It was a whirlwind trip but we did have time to see some sights as well as to get acquainted with the Atkins sisters. They are delightful girls and have certainly reached out to Stephani and Linds. Their mother, Linda, also seems to have bonded with Stephani and Linds and we got some papers signed, showing Linda's desires regarding the girls following her passing. Although it is difficult to have things up in the air regarding the adoption, I think everyone realizes that it is really the only way that it can be for now. I admire the Bennions for taking this on. This isn't a situation where they would have the girls sealed to them because they will be sealed to their own parents eventually so it's really a sweet act of charity. It's been fun to see the kids so excited about these girls!

It was fun for me to show Steph and Linds around my mission and talk through some of my experiences. Even now, my mission seems like a long time ago. I'm glad I wrote a weekly letter home. In preparation for my upcoming talk in sacrament meeting I read back through some of the letters and I was surprised how much I had forgotten already.

This week is a big one for Paul and Jenny. Paul presented a paper at a convention in Chicago on Monday and Tuesday and then they were traveling to the Cutler reunion (Jenny's parents and siblings) that is being held in the Midwest this

time around. This will be the last one for three years when Raymond and Laurie will have completed their time as mission president in the Milwaukee Wisconsin Mission. I'm sure it will be a bitter/sweet time together. Fortunately, the children can visit them in Milwaukee but it still will be a sacrifice to have them gone so long. They will certainly be a wonderful president and mission mom!

I was grateful for Mike and Marci's update letting the word out that they are heading to Rexburg in the months ahead. I know that Marci has mixed emotions about the weather and wind but hopefully they will soon be established and all the good things will outweigh the weather. I know the fellow who Mike will be working with and I think it is a very good situation. Rexburg will continue to grow and Mike's practice can grow along with it. Of course, I'm delighted to have them stay close. It's been so nice to have them as close as Burley the last few years and now they'll be even closer.

I got a sweet letter and picture from Laurel in Guatemala. Really there were two pictures--one of all the Elders in the MTC and one of all the Sisters. It looked like there were nearly as many Sisters as Elders! I appreciated Laurel's letter and her enthusiasm for the mission. I know that the first months are difficult especially with a foreign language in the mix. I think often of Rachel and of her trying to finish up her semester and keep focused on that when in the back of her mind she knows that she will soon be in the field. Hopefully she and Bonnie have had some time to finish up getting things that need to be purchased.

I got on Facebook this afternoon and saw Tim's picture of him holding a tennis tournament trophy! What a handsome guy and congratulations on winning the tournament!

I'm so looking forward to the upcoming events that will bring us together. Our reunion is always a time of strengthening for me and hopefully for each of you. I remember our last reunion. We were caravaning from Bear Lake and my car was so full of gear from the reunion that I was traveling alone. Tim and SaraKay were on their way to St. George: SaraKay to student teach in Phoenix and Tim to visit someone he met who he was interested in. It was such a relief to have the reunion completed for another year and to feel like it truly had been a time of rejoicing. As I drove along I remember saying out loud to Daddy, "Well, dear, that's one fine family!" I suspect that Daddy peeks in on us on those kinds of occasions and I just wanted him to know that I was grateful and proud of each of you.

June 25, 2013

It's been a sweet week with getting SaraKay home and having time to visit and reminisce about our missions. Her plane arrived in Pocatello at noon on Tuesday, the 18th. Stephani and Mike and Marci and little ones arrived shortly before the appointed hour and we went to the second floor of the airport lobby and watched the small plane taxi to a stop right below us on the runway. She was the second one off the plane and we made a mad dash to the first floor gate to welcome her home. She was all smiles (and tears) but admitted that she was feeling pretty grimy after being in the air and from plane to plane for the last 18 hours. She looked wonderful to all of us!

After getting her luggage we went to the Golden Corral and visited over lunch. It was special to have Mike and Marci's kids there as SaraKay hadn't seen Tanner yet and was as surprised with Tanner as I was. He is such a darling little toddler and follows the three girls around like their shadow. When they are excited, he is excited, and when they ran to give SaraKay a big hug, he wasn't far behind! Just having Mike and Marci and Steph there really made it a special occasion for SaraKay!

When we arrived home SaraKay began unpacking her suitcases and talking through her mission experiences. By the time evening rolled around all of the contents of the suitcases were piled on my bed and we were still just sitting and talking about mission life and its ups and downs. SaraKay had an appointment with President Jenks at 6:30 to get her official release and as a part of that interview he invited me in and asked SaraKay to tell him a little about her impressions and insights. It was a sweet experience to share that with her!

I was grateful that we had most of Tuesday to visit without friends dropping in. It was just nice to enjoy the time together. We decided that we would go to the temple on Wednesday morning. It was wonderful to be in the temple together. At one point I looked over at SaraKay and she was sitting with her eyes closed and I was reminded that she was suffering from jet lag. Luckily, she managed to stay awake for most of the session and following that we did some shopping for garments at Deseret Book and also bought a phone for her. I forget what a crazy time it is when

a missionary comes home as far as starting their life over and trying to get what they need. After having the better part of two days with SaraKay all to myself, I was okay when she had friends drop in and stay up late talking and catching up.

Yesterday was as frustrating as the previous two days had been blissful. Stephani forwarded two web sites to SaraKay that were listings of teaching jobs for the upcoming fall. She started down through the different listings and began making phone calls as well as leaving messages with BYU regarding master's programs in music education. It was stressful and exhausting but the more she called the more she could see that jobs for this fall were few and far between. Although it initially appeared that there were lots of job openings, it soon became apparent that the schools had not pulled the ads when the position was filled, so that was a little disappointing. After several phone calls we realized that BYU was not an option until fall of 2014 since the master's programs only start in the fall semester and she is too late for this fall, which we already suspected. She had planned to start in January. She even looked into going to ISU or USU for the master's degree but neither school offered what she needs. She was still hunting leads and we were brainstorming until after eight last night, beginning to wonder if she was destined to work at Kesler's for this next year. At eight last night I suggested that we watch a TV show or do something to relax and I turned on a show but soon noticed that I was watching it alone. SaraKay was fast asleep on the couch!

Today dawned a little more hopeful and things started looking up when Stephani called with all kinds of creative ideas about possible jobs in Cache Valley. Several of her suggestions would be helpful on a resume as well as bring in necessary cash. That was great news after a tiring day of failed attempts yesterday. Steph continues to forward web sites and suggestions and SaraKay is continuing to track them down. Yesterday we even checked on nanny jobs--finding one in Park City that sounded pretty good, including a gym membership, room and board, and the care of one six-year-old daughter! We so appreciate Stephani's continuing efforts to help us with this job hunt.

Today SaraKay heard from four of her old beaus: Zac Hansen, Eric Fuller, Joseph Harper, and Christian Esplin. It was good to hear from each of them but later SaraKay confessed that being a missionary removes you from all the stress of these relationships and she's not sure she wants to get back into it yet. Tonight her friends are having a frisbee party at the stake center and she is off to that. Tomorrow the kids will be arriving after lunch and we'll make final preparations for Sunday. I'm glad that she'll have some time with the family before the dinner on Sunday. We're expecting a good group here for dinner and hopefully the food will stretch and we'll have a gala occasion. I prepared my remarks for sacrament meeting last week and SaraKay has been working on her talk today. We report to the high council on Sunday morning at 7:00 and our meeting is at 11:00. Hopefully everyone will arrive safely and all will go as planned. It seems like a huge milestone to get our missions successfully completed and to be home safe and sound.

June 29, 2013

I've got a few minutes tonight before it's time to gather the troops for prayers and bedtime. Tate, Larsen, and Cole arrived Monday from Philadelphia where they spent some time with Chet. They flew in from D.C. to SLC with a dear friend of Becky's, Holly Arfman, who dropped them off at McDonalds, where SaraKay and I were waiting for them. I was grateful that Holly was able to take them under her wing enroute home from the wedding in D.C. They ended up with a delay in Chicago and it was much more manageable having Holly as a surrogate mom than for Tate to assume that role.

We were so happy to see them! We have had a delightful week. Monday night they went with SaraKay and me to dinner at Gary and Linda's in Blackfoot. They bought a new home in Blackfoot just as I was leaving on my mission and it was so fun to get to see it. It is attractively decorated and lovely. Gary recently retired and their life is taking a new turn with this development. Gary and Linda were such gracious hostesses to all of us! The food was delicious and it was fun to have SaraKay share some more about her mission and compare notes with Ashley's experiences. Ashley served in Brazil but in a different area but Gary and Linda were familiar with a lot of what SaraKay talked about. The boys ended up downstairs playing ping pong with SaraKay for a while so it was a great night all around.

On the way home Monday evening I said to Tate, "If there is something that you would like to do this week, let's see if we can do it." He said, "I would really like to wash my clothes and iron my shirts. I

just hate going around in wrinkled shirts!" I thought I could handle that request. So on Tuesday we pretty much "chilled out" for the day, organized their bedroom, emptied their suitcases and washed their dirty laundry, and just enjoyed the trampoline and the yard. Cole asked if I had a sand pile that he could dig in and I sent him out into the garden area with some buckets, a hose with a spray nozzle and a couple of shovels. I wasn't sure I would ever see him again. He had a great time and soon had created a canal system, a volcano that would erupt to the pleasure of all of us onlookers, and all kinds of rivers and bridges. Larsen joined him later and the two of them got themselves pretty thoroughly muddied up before the activity lost its charm.

Wednesday we went to the zoo at Tautphaus Park and also toured the visitor's center at the Idaho Falls Temple. While SaraKay and the boys watched a movie at the V.C. I made a quick trip to run some errands and then met them back at the Center. What a sweet surprise to discover that two of my favorite Ricks College friends were serving missions at the Center. Marilyn Shirley Gee (Paul took piano from her while a student at Ricks) and Donna Jean Luke Kinghorn who was the Woman of the Year a couple of years before me. I have followed her throughout the years because her husband worked at the college for many years and she was a guest speaker at various activities in the area. We chatted for a while and talked missions since both of them are serving a second mission. What fun to get reacquainted after so many years!

Thursday we spent part of the day at Jenson's Grove. It was the first really hot day of the summer and there was almost 'standing room only' on the beach! I have never seen such a mob of people at one time at that facility. We were lucky to find a parking spot and we staked out our claim to a small piece of beach and enjoyed the summer sun like everyone else around us. SaraKay was a wonderful sport to let Cole and Tate bury her in the sand and all three boys dug holes in the sand and excavated our little piece of earth. What is it about boys and digging??

Today was "build a raft" day and most of the morning was spent constructing a raft that they carried to the canal and launched. They had rigged it with a tow rope so that someone could tow it back up the canal to the bridge after they had reached the other bridge down the canal a ways. I took some cute pictures of it. It wasn't as buoyant as we had hoped but maybe when Becky and Jeff get here tomorrow they will have some mechanical advice for the engineers. Tonight they are all out on the trampoline with SaraKay enjoying a wonderful summer evening.

I don't know what I would have done without SaraKay this week. We have been trading off the duty with the boys and trying to get her situated with health insurance, a phone, job hunting, as well as entertaining some young men who have been keeping touch through visits, phone calls, texting, and Facebook. She has a date tomorrow with a fellow she is very excited about and heard on Facebook today from someone she had liked years ago at Snake River High School. She is happy to have a few things going on in her life right now. Each day she checks on all the websites that she has found where teaching jobs are advertised for Utah and Idaho. Stephani has given her several leads and she has sent resume's out to several places but has only heard back from one. She knows now that she can't get into her master's program until fall of 2014 so she is looking into jobs as well as working at Kesler's part time. She was honest with McKay (Kesler) and told him that she couldn't promise him any specific time since she knows she needs to find more permanent work but he was okay with that.

Becky arrived from China with the other four children and has spent the week with the Smallcombs in California. Jeff has been in Colorado picking up their van and trailer and will be here tomorrow afternoon to visit and then proceed on to the airport to pick up Becky and the kids. I'm looking forward to meeting the four Olsen children as I've never met them in person, only Skyped with them. Maddie has attended Girl's Camp in Arizona with her friends there and will arrive Sunday night about 6:00.

Last weekend was a whirlwind. So that SaraKay would have an opportunity to visit with our extended family, I planned a family party for Saturday afternoon. Everyone arrived and was given various tasks around the yard to complete for me. It really helped our place look nice. That evening we had a campfire and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows and the boys practiced their musical number for the meeting on Sunday. The only downside was that it was so windy and cold that most of us wore winter jackets. But, despite the cold, it was fun to be together again. Of course, on these occasions I really miss those who are far away and hope that someday we can all live close enough that our reunion isn't our only time to be together.

Sunday morning at 7:00 SaraKay and I reported to the high council. That is always a sweet experience. We decided to walk over to the stake center since it was an absolutely beautiful Idaho morning! What a great way to start our day! By the time we returned about 7:30 the house was alive with activity including David in the kitchen cutting up melons, dispensing breakfast, and following the instructions from the previous night's planning session. I am always amazed at how well our family works together and at how much we can accomplish when we all cooperate. By 10:30 most of the family walked to the stake center for meetings. Although we had gone early to practice the musical number, we didn't realize there was choir practice so we didn't get any more practicing done. But it was nice to be there early to get to visit with some ward members.

The homecoming was such a sweet experience with so many friends and family there to show support. It was especially touching to have Jeanie and Scott come from Arizona and my Richards' bunch able to attend. When I was sitting on the stand looking down at my siblings and at Dad's family I was so touched and grateful for their continuing support and encouragement. They are very dear to me. I realized before the meeting started that I couldn't look at any of them or I'd totally lose control of my emotions.

Lindsay, Josh, Steve, David, Mike, and Tim sang "Brightly Beams Our Father's Mercy". Their voices were awesome and blended so well that it put me in mind of when Daddy and his brothers would sing. I was so proud of them! SaraKay and I both spoke about reaching out to the "one". We both had nice comments on our talks and hoped that what we said was appropriate. Several people also wrote us on Facebook and that was thoughtful and kind.

The dinner afterward was well attended. A big thanks to everyone in the family who helped prepare and serve. We couldn't have fed so many so effortlessly if the kids hadn't manned the kitchen and kept the food coming and the dishes washed. By about 5:00 the last of the guests, the kids included, had gone and I was able to finally relax with the big event successfully completed. That will be the last one of its kind in this household. If I serve another mission, I'm going to sneak away and come back without all the fanfare. It was so sweet to have six of the kids here to welcome SaraKay home and to make a fuss.

It was an interesting thing to watch six of SaraKay's old boyfriends as they attended the dinner and lingered a while afterward. I wondered which of them might outlast the others. Finally, most of them left and SaraKay ended up attending the missionary fireside with the last two standing! She had some encouraging words from several of them and had a date today with a fellow from Blackfoot who she dated before his mission. It's been four years since they've seen each other and she'd like to have a chance to get acquainted but he's in Provo so it's going to be a little tricky. She starts at Kesler's on Monday.

July 24, 2013

I just received word that my sister, Kathy's, husband passed away this afternoon with a massive heart attack. Will give out more information when I get notified.

SaraKay got a job offer so she will be teaching choral, strings and maybe Portuguese at a new charter school in Idaho Falls this fall.

(1) Saturday, July 13: The temple trip to the Bountiful Temple with the grandchildren doing baptisms (thanks, Nate, for the family names you prepared for us) and the adults doing an endowment session. Due to the fact that so many of the Utah temples were closed for maintenance the Bountiful Temple was filled to capacity and our experience was lengthier than we anticipated, but it turned out to be a truly wonderful time. Those who helped with the baptisms and confirmations commented that they kept thinking of Dad and of how much he enjoyed doing the baptizing with youth sessions.

(2) Sunday, July 14: Rachel's mission farewell: She and Nate both spoke and did a great job! There was a wonderful response to their invitation to family and friends and the chapel was filled to capacity. The dinner afterwards was delicious and gave the Benson's and Larsen's a chance to renew our friendships that have developed over the years. Steve and Bonnie were proud parents and rightfully so! Tuesday, July 23nd Rachel will be meeting with her doctor to receive the results of the MRI on her back. She has been experiencing back pain the last few weeks and wants to get to the root of it before her departure date the first week in April. Remember her in your prayers.

(3) Sunday, July 14: Arrival and gathering at the Larsen Reunion 2013. The hunting lodge near Coalville, Utah was a wonderful facility. The large

wrap around decks, three stories of windows overlooking the valley below, large modern kitchen, and roomy bedrooms really accommodated our large crowd. Along with the lodge there were eight cabins available for our use. A big thanks to Stephani and Linds and Steve and Bonnie for bunking in the cabins since the main building didn't have the bedroom capacity that we needed.

(4) We missed Katie who is interning in Israel this semester (blogging for a humanitarian business) and Laurel who is preaching the gospel in Honduras, but other than that, we were all present and accounted for! Sam, who is presently attending summer school at BYU-Provo drove back and forth to attend. What a thrill to all be together again!

(5) Monday, July 15: With our boat rental scheduled for 7:00 a.m. it was an early morning for us all. Anyone interested in skiing or wake boarding headed for Jordanelle Reservoir at 6:30 a.m. and Stephani and I scouted out the shoreline, trying to lay claim to a good stretch of beach for our day in the sun. After investigating several inlets and picnic areas, we finally ended up with our party located just around a bend from the marina. Between the rental ski boat, rubber raft, inner tubes, and kayaks, we had a great time. Thanks to Linds, Jeff, and Randy who did the driving and to everyone who helped with the logistics of getting kids here and there and everywhere for their turn on the boats. By the time we had supervised the kids playing on the beach, given grandkids rides on the inner tubes, knee board, skis, and wake board, paddled the kayaks to the far side of the reservoir, had lunch, and applied several layers of sunscreen, we were ready to head home about four and get supper and ready for the night's activities.

(6) Monday evening's program following dinner was missionary reports from SaraKay, Sam and me and then Shauntel conducted the "Stephen A. Larsen Literary and Fine Arts Fair." Shauntel had invited each of us to perform a memorized poem or present a work of art or written composition. At the program each participant received a ribbon for participation and took a few minutes to explain to the family what they had created for the occasion.

(7) Tuesday, July 16: The agenda for the day included a Zumba session under Laurel's capable tutelage, a volleyball (beach ball) game for all ages, an intense adult volleyball game for the die-hard volleyball players, and crafts in the lodge for those not involved in the games. Later a kiddie pool and fun in the hot tub while Paul and Jenny took a few of the kids swimming in a nearby pond. An afternoon thunder storm moved in about three so we did our "Float it or fly it" activity on the covered lower deck. Each sibling and spouse were team captains and members were randomly chosen for each of seven teams. Tim acted as photographer and documented the creations that took shape during the hour allotted. Later each team demonstrated their "invention" and those with flying machines went to the third story deck and flew them to the crowd below. Steve used a timer to document how long each plane or parachute contraption was aloft and determined the winner. There were lots of interesting inventions but the winner turned out to be the little paper airplane that caught the breeze and sailed peacefully to the ground, staying aloft a few tenths of a second longer than its competitors.

For the "float" portion of the competition we all walked to the meandering stream below the lodge and positioned ourselves for the competition. After scouting out a stretch of stream that was unencumbered by fallen logs and other debris the boats were launched and started their journey down through the winding creek. Some of us were wading in the creek downstream and ready to catch the boats as they emerged from the grassy banks and underbrush. Although most of the boats survived the rigors of the journey of special note was the Piro ship launched by Stephani and Josh's team that had a bushy paper sail that was set ablaze prior to its launching and created a fiery spectacle for all of us onlookers.

The favorite "family talent show" proved to be another highlight of the day. Whether it was individual acts or group routines, everyone was a star and we were a grateful audience. After dinner the 10 and under group held a short insight session and each child responded to the question, "What makes you happy?" Later the adults held their own session while a movie entertained the little ones. The topic for the night was to give a verbal snapshot of an incident in the last two years that we would like to share with the group. It was a wonderful session with lots of variety in the "snapshots" shared and a lot of laughter and tears. It was especially satisfying to hear the contributions of the youth. What struck me the most was how they are seeing the hand of

the Lord in their daily lives and they know that He hears and answers their prayers. What a sweet experience for us all to see the growing testimonies of the rising generation. As a clever addition to this session, Beth and Chantelle sang an original rendition of "Tomorrow" from "Little Orphan Annie" which had altered lyrics regarding the Larsen reunion.

Following the insight session everyone raided the kitchen one last time before putting the little ones to bed. Of course, with it being our last night together no one wanted to go to bed so some sat around and visited, some worked on finishing up their craft projects and the teenagers started taking dance instruction from Anna Sue and Joseph who demonstrated their expertise with the jitter-bug during the talent show earlier that evening. As the hour became later, the dancing group continued their instruction on the deck and some of us adults sat and watched. I gave up about midnight and went to bed but the teens kept dancing until nearly 1:30 a.m.

Wednesday morning everyone was up early and getting their family packed up and ready for departure. By about 10:30 a.m. most were ready to go so we had one final family prayer together and said our good-byes. Stephani and Josh and Rachel and I were the last ones out of the lodge and we made a quick perusal of the facility before closing it up. I was delivering Rachel to Blackfoot where her Aunt Shannon picked her up and took her to Idaho Falls where she caught a ride to Rexburg with her Benson grandparents. She had finals Thursday and Friday and Saturday Steve and Chrissy moved her home.

The Larsen reunion of 2013 was such a joyous time for me and again I want to thank Stephani, Jenny, and Steve for locating the facility and planning while I was on my mission. A huge thanks to Stephani and Becky for planning meals and for Stephani helping me do all the shopping for food and equipment. A thanks also to all of you children for making it a priority. I can only imagine how exhausting it is for those who live so far away and have young families. Thank you, thank you! I was so pleased when I got the family picture and SaraKay helped me post it on my Facebook page

(8)Friday, July 19: Drove to Lehi, Utah to participate in the Allan F. Larsen reunion at Staff and Kaye's. Those attending from our Family were Steve, Chrissy, Jared, and Anne Marie; John and Laurel and their four; and Mike and Marci and their bunch. It was fun to see them visit and interact with many of the aunts and uncles and cousins who they have not seen for years. Others attending were: Gary and Linda and Mindy, Garen, Emily, Lisa, and Ashley and families; Staff and Kaye with Jennifer, Coco, Jimmy and families; Jeanie and Scott and Julianne, Maren and families; Mark and Rita with Jessica, JoEllen, Jeanette, and Jeff and families, Rick and Terry, and Karen and Jim and Jacob and his new bride, Betsy. We visited while the grandchildren swam in the private pool or watched a movie in Staff and Kaye's home movie studio or played video games. My bunch left Friday night for other destinations and I stayed at a motel in Lehi for the night before rejoining them at Staff's the next morning.

I so appreciated the opportunity to visit with Daddy's siblings and catch up on what they are doing and to see the grandchildren in person. Although I see the kids on Facebook occasionally, it was very satisfying to get to visit in person. I so appreciate Staff and Kaye being willing to open their home to all of us. I love the Larsens and appreciate their many kindnesses to me and their sweet friendships over the years.

My trip home alone from Utah Saturday evening was a good time for me to reflect upon all of the wonderful events and conversations of the preceding week. I couldn't help but be grateful to be a part of such a wonderful group of relatives and to feel of your loving concern.

(9) Sunday, July 21: Becky and Jeff arrived from Utah for the week. As you know, Jeff got his offer from the company in Wisconsin and they will be flying out Saturday morning to house hunt. They will be here with me until Friday and then will take some of the younger children with them back to stay at the Olsen's in Fruit Heights and I will keep the older ones here with SaraKay and me. Yesterday we all went in their super van to Island Park, Mesa Falls, and then to the Play Mill in West Yellowstone for a showing of "Fiddler on the Roof". What a fun and full day!!! As I mentioned earlier, SaraKay got a teaching position at a school in Idaho Falls and will be teaching grades 6-10. She is thrilled about this and signs the contract today.

July 31, 2013

(Wednesday) I just got off of the phone with my sister, Kathy. She and her family have been involved these last couple of days in their Bennion reunion. It has been on their calendar for a long

time and it was unexpected that Dick would pass away when he did, but it enabled them to carry on with their plans this week and they have enjoyed having the time together. Kathy sounded good and I expect that she will do fine. She has spent a great deal of time the last 10 years caring for Grandpa Arch, then Grandma Ilene, and then Uncle Dick. Her new status will bring an adjustment and some lonely times but I know that she will do great. She is presently serving as Relief Society president and with that and her grandmothering she will have plenty to fill her life with satisfaction.

Dick's funeral was wonderful. Brett, Lane and Abby all spoke and told very touching stories and memories of their dad. Two grandchildren also spoke and Abby's two daughters sang, "I Am A Child Of God". The bishop of their ward had high praise for Dick and his life of devotion and service. I think the family were very pleased with how everything turned out. It was especially sweet to have Charles and Lisa and her family able to come from such distances. It was wonderful to see him. Lisa, Don, Whitni, Chauncey, Abby and Riley were all there, too, and it was fun to have some time with all of us siblings together. I rode with Nate and Maureen who picked me up in Blackfoot. We also picked up Steve at the Brigham City exit and their daughter, Chelsea, in Centerville area. What a pleasant bunch! It has been a long time since I've had the opportunity to visit with them about all they are doing now that they are settled in Rexburg. I still haven't seen their new home and shop but once the summer is past, I will make the trip. It is nice to know that we'll have Mike and Marci in Rexburg with Chad and Trish and Nate and Maureen all living close at hand.

I really appreciated Steve's sacrifices to attend the funeral. Those kinds of occasions are still difficult for me but having him close at hand seems to make it more bearable. It was nice to have several of the guests at the funeral comment on how much Steve reminds them of Dad....of his sweetness and gentle nature. I think Steve enjoyed getting better acquainted with Nate and Maureen. We had wonderful conversations about a multitude of subjects and of course, spent our share of time laughing about life and its ups and downs.

Becky and Jeff spent last week here with the children and left Friday for Fruit Heights and the Olsen's. They caught an early flight out of SLC for Wisconsin and Olsen's have had the four Olsen's and Cole and I've had Maddie, Tate, and Larsen here with SaraKay and me. It was really fun to take them to Sunday meetings and have so many ward members approach them and ask them about their life in China and their future plans. No one asked, "Who are your parents?" Everyone took one look at Maddie and figured it out! We had a potluck dinner after our block of meetings as a celebration for July 24th and so there was plenty of time for them to meet the ward members, young and old. Tonight Maddie and Tate are with the ward YW and YM at a baptismal session at the Idaho Falls Temple and on Friday they will spend the day with the ward at the Martin Harris Pageant in Utah.

Becky and Jeff have called regularly and today they found a couple of houses that they felt might be adequate for their big family. Of course, they would like the perfect house for the perfect price in the best ward and the top school district and close to Jeff's work, but they know that there will be some compromises before this process if over so I'm just sitting in on the conversations and Skype sessions and enjoying watching the family approach this next big transition. I know that when all is said and done, they will find a wonderful place and will soon grow to love and appreciate the ward, the community, the area, and the great state of Wisconsin.

The good news is that Shauntel and Randy are about four hours away, Keith and Maggie are about an hour and a half away, Paul and Jenny are about six hours away, and Jenny's parents may live just around the block! I'm sure that the Midwest branch of our family will share some wonderful times together!

On Sunday evening Maddie, Tate, and Larsen as well as SaraKay and I sat down and mapped out our week, including eating at Rupe's, going to a movie, attending Church events, and of course, helping me with several projects that need doing around the house and yard. Monday we left for Logan to visit the Bennions and see their house guests, Linda Atkins and Lin and Frankie. It was such a surprise to arrive and discover that that morning Linda had been rushed to the hospital and was undergoing tests for her heart and lungs. Stephani had been with her at the emergency room most of the day along with the youngest daughter, Frankie. Lin and Josh were gracious hosts and fed us toasted cheese sandwiches and ramen for lunch and then I took off for the hospital and the kids played ping pong and video games. Linda was stable when I arrived

but the doctors chose to keep her there for several days since her heart is so damaged. Eventually Stephani arrived home and we enjoyed supper together. Linda and kids have been there for over a week and Stephani has helped them find possible apartments, get Medicaid set up, get a case worker, go school shopping, check options for school, and a myriad of other details. Stephani has been so busy that she's hardly had time to think about her own school starting the 12th but she's hoping to welcome Katie home from Israel next Wednesday, get Linda and girls moved into their new place midweek, and report for work soon thereafter.

It was reassuring to me to visit with Stephani and Linds and see the sweet relationship that they have with the Atkins. They obviously have endeared themselves to this family and have gone the extra mile to help them feel welcome in their new location. When I talked with Stephani today she said that Linda is in good spirits and although she will remained hospitalized for a few days, she seems to be doing well. I might mention that their trip to Maryland and their subsequent experiences there working with missionaries, ward members, neighbors, and other concerned people was a marathon! To get the house emptied, boxes packed and shipped, and all the details of such a venture was unbelievably difficult and made more so by occurrences that added to the drama. They both felt the Lord's watch care over them all and were aware that they had "parted the Red Sea" by the time they lifted off on their flight home with Linda on a breathing machine and a small dog in tow as well as the two daughters. They nearly missed their flights due to complications at security but all arrived safe and sound and until the incident with Linda on Monday, things had run smoothly at home. It still doesn't seem real to me that this little black lady from Maryland is now living in Utah and becoming a part of our family.

One of the things that Steve mentioned when I was with him was that although Rachel's mission will be delayed, the doctors are hoping that the cortisone shots will be effective and she can carry on with her plans. I know that Bonnie has been wonderful to keep us all in the loop and in turn I hope that we'll remember her in our prayers. Their new home is moving forward with a closing date in August so they continue to hope for a buyer for their present home. Thank goodness the market is improving and homes seem to be selling better these days.

Mike and Marci will be coming Sunday with their four little ones and SaraKay, Maddie and I are going to share the duty of taking care of them while mom and dad are trekking. Maddie is happy to earn some school money and I'm happy for the help. I think that after the Trek the next big thing on the docket is helping them get moved to Rexburg. They are so relieved to have located a home and that they won't have to move twice like they thought they were going to have to do. They may even be in Chad and Trish's ward which would be fun for them both. Lots of changes in their lives right now!

SaraKay met with her new boss on Monday and talked through her contract and responsibilities. She feels good about the job and her ability to do it so I'm trying not to worry about it. She will start on the 12th so she has given notice at Kesler's and will reduce her hours at her tutoring job, too. She seems happy with being home and has really enjoyed the constant influx of family around here. She is still planning to attend BYU in the fall of 2014 so this job will help her financially to be ready for that. I am so grateful that her job search was successful and that she can get a feel for her profession and if she wants to pursue a master's degree or continue to add to her resume through actual teaching jobs. Time will tell.

I have appreciated that the Seely kids have helped me around the place with some clean-up and organizing. Today Tate sawed off a limb on a tree that was needing to be removed and we cleaned out the shed, cleaned off the equipment that has been stored in it, and spiffed things up. Yesterday they helped me with the patio area and tomorrow we will put the summer equipment away in the garage and give it a good cleaning. I've tried to not "work them to the bone" like Larsen said that I did when I visited them once in Arizona! Besides that, we're having a great time along with our work projects. Hope that all of you are doing well and having some good times together as the summer begins to wind down. I've loved getting Laurel's missionary letters! She is full of enthusiasm and although I'm sure these first few months in Honduras are challenging, she is upbeat and full of the Spirit. I'm so grateful that we had a successful reunion and that everyone arrived back home safe and sound. Every time I look at my screen saver and see that picture in the lodge, I have to smile. I know we are missing several key people (Katie, Laurel, Alia, Amelia, and Tanner) but it's still a great picture. SaraKay put it

on my Facebook page and I still get comments from people wherever I go.

August 14, 2013

This past week was quite a marathon for Maddie, SaraKay and me. We took care of the Burley munchkins while Mike and Marci chaperoned their stake's pioneer trek. When things got really hectic with Amber, Ellie, Olivia, and Tanner, we would remind ourselves that Marci does this alone most days and somehow survives so surely we could manage with our nearly one to one ratio of adults to children. We packed a lot into the week: jumped on the trampoline with the sprinkler on, jumped on the trampoline with the sprinkler off, made sailing boats with summer squash, swam in the ditch, ran crazy through our flooded back yard, rode the eight tricycles that Hanni's loaned us for the week, made mud pies, went swimming at the Blackfoot pool, shopped at Walmart, visited the library and checked out 40+books, read 40+ books, ate Popsicle, frozen yogurt, ice cream cones, and other treats, watched DVD's from the library, played musical beds with the crib, cot, and beds in the big bedroom every night, swung on the swings (over and over and over) and basically wore Grandma out.

When Mike and Marci called enroute home on Friday from Wyoming and said that they would be here by about 6:30 to get the troops, it was a big relief. I was so grateful that no one was injured or lost during the week and so happy to return them safe and sound. About six that evening Amber and Ellie disappeared and although I wasn't worried about them, I wondered what they were up to. They had previously been climbing the apple trees and feeding the windfall apples to the horse so I thought maybe they were doing that. When Mike and Marci arrived, we walked around the back of the house and there was Amber crawling bare legged and barefoot in the wood bin gathering wood and tossing it onto the lawn. She and Ellie were making a lean-to as their final project of the week.

I so appreciated Maddie and SaraKay. SaraKay was in and out with her Kesler's schedule so Maddie was the one I depended on the most. She is a lovely young woman and was wonderful help. She left Friday morning with SaraKay for Utah. SaraKay dropped her off in Fruit Heights at the Olsen's and then continued on to Lehi where she spent some time with some Brazilian friends and then had a fun date with Joey Harper that night. When Mike and Marci arrived Friday evening, we had a little while to talk about their experiences and their appreciation for those who suffered. Our stake has had three treks but we have never gone to Martin's Cove. After visiting with Mike and Marci I am convinced that going to the actual site gives an added dimension to the experience.

Saturday I started on the project of switching bedrooms and offices. Ever since Dad died, I have left his office largely untouched except for going through the file cabinet and getting the information that I needed to carry on with our financial concerns. So, I asked SaraKay if she would like to use Dad's office and she readily agreed. Within a short while she was trudging up the stairs from the basement with boxes, books, pictures, and other things. She unloaded Dad's bookcase, took some of the pictures off of the walls, and unloaded the desk drawers. That began a chain of events that we are still working on. We decided to move SaraKay's bedroom upstairs so that she isn't downstairs alone and when winter comes it will be nice to not have to heat the basement. With that change I had to unload all of my family history binders and other stuff from that closet. We have been working together on it all week and have been in such a mess that at times I could hardly get from room to room for all the clutter. I have also wanted to downsize my king size bed for a long time and so we have included that in this redecorating project, too. Just shuffling these four rooms around has about done me under and put me out of the mood to even consider moving.... for the present at least!

Although I'm far from finished with rearranging, things are settled enough that we can live as we gradually address what's left. I think that this is a good thing to do and the time was just right with SaraKay settling in for the next year. We were tabulating the other day how long it has been since she has lived at home and with college, student teaching, and serving a mission it has been about five years! When people in the community find out that she got a job in Idaho Falls and is living at home many of them comment that they are happy that I won't have to live alone now. I didn't realize that so many people worried about that. It hasn't been much of an issue but it is nice to have SaraKay around to keep me company. Now if I can just influence her to get to bed at night!

SaraKay started her training on Monday and came home excited and happy with the staff and situation. Many of her fears have been put to rest and she is feeling like she can do what is required. She won't start with the students for two weeks but she has another week of training after this one and today she is meeting with Deanne Casperson who is the Snake River High School music teacher. She has offered to mentor SaraKay and we are thrilled for her help. Colleen Winder met with her last week and really helped her get a feel for how to proceed with a beginning strings program. I'm so excited for her and grateful that things have worked out. She would like to be closer to Provo but she is happy with free rent and hopes to save enough for her graduate program.

I have felt some anxiety regarding all of these moves that the family is making. Mike and Marci were supposed to be able to move in Wednesday but there was a glitch at closing and occupancy was delayed until Friday. They have spent the day today with last minute details including getting the lights on the trailer they are using to work with the pickup they are using. They hoped to be here early afternoon but finally got on their way about 4:30. Marci is following Mike and the trailer load and has the four kids riding with her. It's been a slow trip and they still aren't here yet but Mike just called and said that they were just passing Pocatello. He works tomorrow morning so he'll go for that and Marci and little ones will keep me company here and then they will travel to Rexburg Friday morning and unload. Mike will return on Saturday for the rest of their furnishings. Their home isn't sold so they don't have to have everything done immediately and that gives them a little breathing room.

Becky and Jeff are nearly through with their summer and after Tate returns from attending scout camp with Steve and Jared, they will be ready to head east. Becky said that it will be nice to have their own place again. I'm sure it's been frustrating at times but I'm so grateful that the job came through, the house came through, they've got a nice van to travel in, and they have stayed healthy and safe. I will be spending a couple hours with them on Friday en route to Kathy's so I'm happy to get to see them before they go.

Steve and Bonnie's closing date is August 21st. Although they haven't sold their home, they are making the move and happy to get a little settled before school starts for the kids. Steve is at camp this week since the scout master had complications and couldn't go. I'm sure this is a crazy busy time for them. Rachel had her cortisone shot so time will tell if this is going to work for her.

Stephani and Linds continue to help and mentor Linda. She was able to secure a lovely townhouse fairly close to Walmart and they have been gathering furniture to furnish it. This has been such a huge undertaking and I continue to marvel at how good the whole Bennion family has been to help them get situated. Steph said that the people in Linda's ward have been so accepting and sweet to them. Katie arrived home from Israel and promised me that she would come visit us and show us all her pictures and do a running commentary on her time in the Holy Land.

August 24, 2013

I just returned home from helping the Hanni's with their garage sale. I offered a couple of weeks ago to help them and I put in a few hours yesterday and again this morning. How I hate to see them move! When I called to tell Tim that they were moving, he said, "That's terrible, Mom!" My sentiments exactly! They are empty-nesters now and the house and yard are far too much for them to care for. It was kind of fun yesterday to sit at the money table and visit with people as they came to the sale. Some ask about the price of the house as well as purchased items and I saw some neighbors that I haven't seen for a while so it was fun. They have located a home in Blackfoot and hope to simplify and improve their financial situation with this move. They've lived here for 25 years we are all sad to see them go.

While I was sitting waiting for my first customer I got a phone call from Anna Sue. She and Andrea were enroute to Provo to drop her off for her first big semester at BYU! She sounded excited and happy but a little in awe that she had finally arrived at this point in her life. Starting college and leaving home is always such a momentous time in a person's life and I'm sure that she and Andrea have mixed emotions about her leaving. Dave and Andrea have had a lot of good-byes lately: Laurel to Honduras, Mum Laurel on a mission, and now Anna to Provo. Anna is such a force for good that I'm sure she will be sorely missed!

This morning I went over at about 8:00 since I thought that there would be a huge crowd but shortly thereafter it started to cloud up and rain so Melanie sent me home early and I told her to call if the crowds arrived later. Moving is such an

exhausting affair but it does force us to come face to face with all our "stuff" and make the hard decisions about what's junk and what is necessary. SaraKay and I have been involved in that exercise as we've located her upstairs. It's amazing how stuff accumulates over time.

On Monday of this past week, I went to Mike and Marci's new home in Rexburg. They had help over the weekend from Lindsay and Josh as well as Uncle Nate and Chad and family. When I arrived, I was pleasantly surprised at how much they already had moved in and it was fun to work with Marci on setting up her kitchen and some of the closets. It is a beautiful, roomy home with lots of wonderful features such as a three-car garage that will hold not only two cars but lawn mower, tools, storage items, and sports equipment. Mike is elated with that. The kids have already found friends who live nearby and it appears that there is no shortage of children in the neighborhood. Their home opens in the back yard onto a beautiful grassy park and gives the kids plenty of room to run as well as to play on a BigToy that is a part of the park. Their home sits up high with a walk-in basement so Marci can look out and see most of the park and keep an eye on the kids. Mike was at work most of the day and came home and said that he enjoys the environment at the clinic and things seem to be going well with that transition. Mike said that he had a Burley coworker tell him that there is a stress indicator that gives points for the amount of stress inherit in various life events and that right now with a relocation, pregnancy, new home, and new job that the indicator is off the charts! I can believe that. Life is so full of situations that are trying. I'm grateful for a strong constitution (personally as well as nationally) and for good emotional health. It's a wonderful blessing to have the gospel which helps us put all things in perspective as well as giving us peace even when we are in the middle of the fray.............and this summer has been one huge fray for many of us!!!!

Monday evening, I drove out to see Nate and Maureen's home and property. A year ago, they bought property about three miles out from Rexburg and have been improving it and getting settled in. Maureen's mother, Katherine, is staying with them and it was sweet to see her. She is still very bright and pleasant despite her 90+ years and continues to thrive under Maureen's watchful eye. The property has many large, mature pine trees, a fire pit surrounded by pines, a large shop, and wonderful possibilities. This past year they have done some remodeling and Maureen has cleverly decorated the bedrooms and other areas. Nate is serving in a BYU-I student bishopric and Maureen is in a student stake Relief Society presidency. Although they hardly know their own ward members, they are willingly giving of their time and talents to fulfill these callings. I feel so fortunate to have them close! They are amazing people and I always learn from them whenever I have the pleasure of association. It is interesting that Rexburg is kind of the center place for their family. They have Chad in Rexburg, Keith in Wisconsin, Marlayne in Billings, Chelsea in Salt Lake, Bree in Salt Lake, Tanner in Rexburg, Ben in Utah, Laurel in Billings and Tenille in Arizona so Rexburg is a great location for them. Nate is doing some job supervising in the area for Chad so it's a win-win situation for them all.

Tuesday afternoon I hurried home from Rexburg to get the basement put back together in preparation for a visit by my old high school friend, Vickie Lindburg, on Wednesday at noon. Some of you will remember her visiting us while we lived in Rockford. She frequently comes back to Idaho from her home in Seattle to visit her aging mother. Two months ago, her mother passed away and so Vickie has lost her father, mother, and sister, leaving her the only surviving member of her immediate family. Her sister Gay, was married to the president of Bethlehem Steel and was left a fortune when her husband passed a couple of years ago. They had no children and so Vickie is going to be the recipient of some money in the very near future. She was left a sizable amount with her mother's passing but her inheritance from Gay could be as much as $3,000,000 dollars! Wow, what a life altering development. She said that at one point in her life she weighed over 500 pounds and her life expectancy was short. What a strange turn of events that she is the lone survivor now! Anyway, we had a good long visit and I gave her my best legal advice: be careful, be prudent, and work with a professional to get the help she will need to handle this windfall.

Although I had thoroughly cleaned the basement and changed all the beds, Vickie and her friend decided to stay in Idaho Falls for the night since they had commitments there Thursday morning. That worked for me and relieved a little of the stress I was feeling about my other commitments that day. About 3:30 Katie and Rachel arrived from Logan and soon SaraKay was

home from school and she had a few minutes to visit with us before she left for a date. It was a blind date from someone at work and she was dreading it a little especially when she realized that Katie and Rachel were going to be here for the evening. Katie just returned a couple of weeks ago from her time in Israel and I have wanted some time with her to see her pictures and have her tell me about her experiences there. When she found some time that she could come she invited Rachel and it gave her a traveling companion as well as made a nice addition to our time together. Katie, Rachel, and I sat on the couch and Katie gave us a commentary of her 2000+ pictures. It was so intriguing to see pictures of the Arabic children and families, of the Holy Land sites, as well as pictures of the countryside. What an amazing cultural experience. Katie is presently job hunting for a journalism job so she's spending time on the computer checking jobs anywhere and everywhere.

Having Rachel here gave me a chance to quiz her a little on her upcoming back surgery. Her surgery will be on Thursday this next week. The hospital stay will be overnight and if all goes well the recovery will be about three months. That will put her going into the mission field the first part of December. As long as she shows improvement, she can keep her mission call to North Carolina. The success rate of the surgery is about 95%. She called and visited with Tim since his surgery two years ago was very similar to what she is having done.

Another plus of her delay is that she will get to help the family get moved. They were originally scheduled for Wednesday but the paper work was delayed so it was going to be today. Pretty exciting time for their whole family! What a blessing that they got a good offer on their home and won't be saddled with two mortgage payments a month. By the way, Mike and Marci had a nearly identical situation regarding their Burley home. They just received a cash offer and are dickering to see if they can find a price that works for both of them. I haven't heard from them but I know they were being very careful not to discourage a potential buyer, especially one with cash. What a blessing that would be!

I'll have to tell you a funny thing that happened with Katie and Rachel. Thursday night we were talking about various things and Rachel mentioned that last week she had to drive one of her siblings to an activity in the morning and she wasn't up and dressed yet so she drove in her pajamas. We got to laughing about that and when it was bed time, I told them that I needed to be up early to help Melanie with the garage sale and SaraKay leaves about 7:00 for work so I told them to just sleep in and enjoy the vacation. After I had been at the garage sale for a couple of hours, Melanie's daughter, Brianna arrived and offered to handle the money so I came home. I wasn't expected until noon so when I came in the house it was quiet and I figured the girls were still asleep. I was standing at the window doing dishes when all at once Rachel and Katie walked by on the lawn in their pajamas. I couldn't imagine what they were doing out and about in their pajamas but after the discussion the night before I thought maybe they had been out for a walk. I yelled at them and they looked up at the kitchen window and started to laugh. I opened the locked back patio door and they told me that they were so glad that I was home. They had not been able to get the doorknob in that bedroom to work and Katie thought that they heard someone upstairs and that they should just pound on the door until someone heard them and rescued them but Rachel suggested that they open the window, remove the screen, and climb out of the window well. This they proceeded to do and then they discovered that the back door was locked and they wondered if they were going to be able to get back in or if they were going to have to stroll over to the neighbors and get my attention and some help. They both looked like they had just climbed out of bed (which they had) and so sheepish. We all laughed about all their adventures at grandma's house!

Becky called this morning and they have arrived in Wisconsin!!! What a relief. She said that their stay at Shauntel's was short and with early mornings and school and then with them doing some touring during the day they didn't get much of a chance to see the kids but enjoyed their time with Shauntel and mentioned what a lovely home and setting the Andersons have in North Liberty. They are all so pleased that now their families can get together. Jenny and Paul are visiting Jenny's parents the weekend of September 6th so they are hoping to have some time with them while they see Jenny's folks. I think the bunch already are making plans for Thanksgiving.

SaraKay feels like her ship has arrived..........or something. This past week she had four dates all with great guys and next week she already is

booked. She can't figure out why serving a mission has made such a difference in her love life but I tell her to just enjoy it while it lasts. She starts school on Monday and is spending today doing lesson plans and picking music. She's feeling the pressure and hoping that she'll be able to rise to the challenge. It's been fun to have her around. She really livens up this quiet household.

I've started the process of going through my file cabinets and discarding unnecessary papers. It's going to be a big job but I'm trying to de-junk the house so when the time comes to move, it won't be such a horrendous job. Think of it--32 years of accumulation! Anyway, never a dull moment here in Moreland. By the way............a cute anecdote from my Primary lesson. It was on forgiving others and as a part of it I was to show a picture of Jesus on the cross. The lesson advised that some children would be very sad looking at the picture so to be sensitive to that. Well, the manual was right. When I showed the picture and started into the story of Jesus forgiving those who had harmed him, all the children became very sober and asked questions about why they pounded nails in his hands, etc. One little boy looked very closely at the picture and said, "So how did he die?" Another child without skipping a beat said, "He got a big sliver on that wood he's on and died from the sliver".

One last sweet story. When Mike and Marci were here last weekend, I called on Olivia to give a blessing on the food. Her prayer went something like this: "Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for flowers and polka dots and our toys." I thought I heard her say, "polka dots" and when the prayer ended, I looked at Mike who was stifling a grin and then I knew she really had said "polka dots". So let that be a lesson to all of us. If we're having a bad day, just remember that we can always be thankful for flowers and polka dots and toys!

September 1, 2013

This week was SaraKay's introduction into the world of teaching or maybe I should say it was her "trial by fire". Although she has been attending two weeks of training at the Odessey Charter School in Idaho Falls, this was her first week with the students. I have been worried about the situation because they are a new school and as far as the music program was concerned, supplies were limited and she was pretty much on her own. She did have a $300 budget but that was a paltry sum compared to what she needed. The school didn't even have a piano and so SaraKay has been hustling around trying to order music stands, borrow a piano, order strings beginner's books, and spend time with several music teachers who were generous to her in their counsel and supplies. When she left here Monday morning she looked beautiful with a smile on her face and excited anticipation in her heart. Although I was anxious to know how her day was progressing, I didn't call her during the day and just waited expectantly for her report of her first official day. About five she called enroute home. Her day had been a nightmare right out of Hades and she was discouraged and overwhelmed. The music she had selected hadn't worked, the classroom set-up (she shares a room with a math teacher) was dysfunctional, the kids were disrespectful; she was in the depths of despair.

We talked as she drove home and by the time she drove in the garage and came in the house she was in tears. I couldn't help thinking about the phrase, "Houston, we have a problem". It was a miserable evening as she talked about the day: the class-scheduling software had not worked and her classes were full of kids who hadn't signed up for choir; her strings class only had three students in it when she was anticipating 15; the middle school choir class had a student whose antics and huge loud voice totally disrupted any order that she tried to maintain; the room was small and the choir was big. Well, you get the idea. By the time the day was over SaraKay sat in faculty meeting with other complaining teachers and wondered what in the world she had gotten herself into. She said that she could see that her idea of how she would teach was very idealistic and that now she was going to have to totally rethink her ideas and philosophies and adjust to this new reality. It was daunting for a new, young teacher who has been passionate her whole life about music and just couldn't imagine that her students wouldn't feel the same way about it.

Over supper and throughout the evening we talked through each situation and possible ways to handle it. Stephani (the master classroom management resource) called and SaraKay was able to go over the various situations with her and things started to look up a little. I was so grateful for Stephani and her expertise and counsel. She is an amazing teacher and works with that middle school age of students so her advice was invaluable.

During family prayer that night we pleaded with the Lord to inspire and strengthen SaraKay for the task at hand. She spent time pulling karaoke songs off of the internet and typed up the lyrics so that she would have some pieces that might capture the interest of her students. The next morning, I mentioned to my walking ladies that SaraKay was struggling and one of them was headed to the temple that morning and said that she would put her name on the prayer roll. I left walking early so I could give SaraKay that encouragement before she left for school. Later she told me that in her prayers that morning she had asked the Lord to please just help her see that this task was do-able and that there was hope for her succeeding.

As you can imagine I spent some time on my knees that day, too, petitioning the Lord in her behalf. Tuesday night when she had finished her day, she was weary but smiling and she told me of all the tender mercies that she had received that day in answer to the prayers of many. Well, although the rest of the week wasn't quite as good as Tuesday, she can see that it is within her power to do this but that it will demand her best effort. By Thursday night she was more than ready for the four-day weekend and happily attended play practice at the Nuart and took a mental and emotional break from the rigors of the classroom.

While SaraKay's week was full of tough things, I felt like my week was full of happy things. After a busy time on Monday and Tuesday continuing with my organizing project, I left for Cache Valley Tuesday afternoon. I arrived at Steph and Linds about 5:30 and joined them for a delicious chili and chips supper along with fresh produce for their prolific garden. Earlier that day Linds picked clean a small peach tree in their yard and there were several grocery bags on their dining room table of peaches that needed attention. Stephani had arrived home not too far ahead of me and following supper we worked together to freeze the peaches and get them tucked away for another time. We hadn't been too far into our project when Linda Atkins called and asked if Stephani would take Lin to YW that evening to a Personal Progress dinner and activity. Steph agreed and we turned off the boiling pot of water that we had been blanching the peaches in and hurriedly changed into something more suitable for the event: something pink or purple! By the time we left the house we were a little late but Lin was ready for us when we arrived, all decked out in all kinds of pink and purple clothes, hair accessories, socks, shoes, jewelry, and to top it off, wild pink and purple make-up! We arrived at the church feeling perfectly at home with Lin's extravagant outfit when we saw the other YW looking equally bizarre! We enjoyed a delicious meal of breakfast casserole and pancakes and juice and visited with the other YW and their mothers. It was heartwarming to see how the ward reached out to Lin and pulled her into the activity.

Later we returned home to our peaches and Katie who had been in Salt Lake for the day visiting friends and family. She is still job hunting but it was fun for me to have her be a part of the evening's festivities, especially when she, Josh, and Stephani did an exercise session with a video game called "Let's Dance". We all had a good laugh and the three of them got a good workout!

Wednesday morning, I visited Linda and took her shopping for some groceries. It was the first time that I had seen her apartment and I was so thrilled to see what a wonderful place she lived in and what a nice neighborhood. The townhouse is a part of a larger complex and very near a Walmart and other stores that makes it so convenient since Linda doesn't own a car. She seems to be very happy with her situation although she gets lonely for her Maryland friends and her life there. Steph picks up Lin and Frankie every morning and takes them to school with her. After school they wait for her to finish up in her room and then she drops them off home and visits with Linda before returning home herself. They usually come for dinner at the Bennions on Thursday and then have a Book of Mormon study time with the family and then come again on Sunday. It has been sweet to see the two families mesh and continue to prepare for the time that the two will become one. For now Linda seems to be enjoying relatively good health and is becoming acquainted with life in a predominately Mormon community.

At noon I met Steve and Bonnie and we enjoyed a quick lunch at Costa Vida and then we went back to their new home in Hyrum. What fun to tour their new place and to see how excited they are about this change. It is certainly a lovely place and will give them more room than their previous residence. They are getting things put away and slowly but surely getting pictures hung on the walls, the kitchen organized, and meeting the friends and neighbors who live in their ward and neighborhood. I couldn't help being grateful for the many tender mercies that they have received

that have enabled them to make this move and upgrade.

Thursday morning Steve and I handled the breakfast scene before school while Bonnie took Rachel to the hospital for her surgery. They left at 6:00 a.m. and by the time I got to the hospital at 8:30 she was already in surgery. The hospital was very accommodating and contacted Bonnie through a pager to let her know the progress of the surgery. Bonnie and I had some good time to visit as we waited during the surgery and at one point, we went for a walk around the hospital grounds to break up the hours of waiting. Finally, when we could see that it was still going to be another couple of hours I decided to leave for home and keep touch with Bonnie when the surgery was over. In all it was about a five-hour surgery but the doctor was very optimistic and Rachel felt better almost immediately after it was over. She continues to improve and is home taking it easy for a while. It is about a three-month recovery but she can be up and about and is continuing to look forward to her mission departure that has been delayed until December. Thanks for your faith and prayers.

When I arrived home SaraKay soon arrived from school and collapsed on the couch, grateful to have survived her week. She was soon off to play practice and I began again with my filing project. This next week I have doctor, dentist, and eye appointments as well as sessions with my financial adviser and attorney regarding my situation and updating my will. I really haven't had time to think about some of this stuff for the last two years so it will feel good to take care of all this business. Mike called Thursday evening and we talked over his status with his move and how his job was going. He is very pleased with the personnel and situation at work and feels that he and Dr. Burtenshaw complement each other and have similar philosophies regarding the practice. He is anxious to be tutored by a dentist who has a lot of experience and who is willing to mentor Mike as he learns new procedures. Friday night they had a summer party in Jackson Hole at the Bar J Ranch and Marci got to meet the staff and get better acquainted with them. Mike commented to me that he is always happy to have Marci at his side. She is such an asset!

Saturday morning, I met Mike at McDonalds and we drove his van to Burley to finish up the last of the details of their move. All of the remaining items were stacked in their garage and I tackled the final clean-up inside while Mike mowed the lawn and then loaded the van. The house was nearly spotless already except for the frig and oven and a few cupboards that needed to be wiped out. Marci had really done a great job of cleaning and finishing it off was easy.

Mike on the other hand was determined to get most of the garage items into the van and by the time he was through, it was packed to the roof. Fortunately, he had removed all the seats before he left Rexburg that morning so there was quite a bit of capacity. His last things to load were bikes on a bike rack. He had two bikes and a rack that held three so he loaded a small step ladder that we had been using on the last spot on the rack and he pronounced it good and we got ready to leave. Mike drove and I sat on the passenger side with two boxes by my feet, one between us on the console and three on my lap and leaning against the door. We knew we were a funny sight but it just felt so good to be through and on our way home! I couldn't help but have a little nostalgia as we pulled out of their driveway and thought back of all the times Dad and I had visited them over the years including the day that Mike was sustained as bishop. Burley has been a wonderful home for them.

When they first arrived, Amber (who was seven in April) was about six months old. That doesn't seem possible. I told Mike that making a move like this would be so full of nostalgia if it wasn't for the fact that moves are always exhausting and crazy with details. That takes some of the romance out of it for us all.

It was especially sweet for Mike and me to have three uninterrupted hours of visiting enroute and homeward bound. We talked about a variety of topics and thoroughly enjoyed being together. We also had planned to catch the BYU game but as I'm sure some of you know, a lightning storm delayed the game and it didn't start again until about an hour later. The only way that SaraKay and I could get it later was to follow a Deseret News blog with all the comments and play by play reports. Even when we couldn't hear it or see it, we were pretty stressed out by the time the final 20 seconds were over and we came up short a field goal. What a disappointment after all the hype. Anyway, I got home safe and sound and Mike arrived home in time for the neighborhood party in honor of them and another couple who just moved into the ward.

I received word from Becky last night that although they weren't going to move into their

home until September 6th, the owners vacated early so they could move in sooner. Since arriving in the neighborhood, they have had neighbors and ward members offer them furniture, towels, pots and pans, and other necessities until their shipments arrive from Arizona and China. It could still be several weeks away but they are so happy to finally be in their new home, in their new location, in their new ward and schools, and at the end of this odyssey!

This afternoon I had a short but wonderful visit from Jim and Karen who were on their way for a few days' vacation in the area. We just sat and visited about our families, the reunion, the extended family, and ultimately about the many blessings that our families enjoy. I really appreciated them taking time to stop and it was fun to get the latest on Teresa, Jake and Betsy, and Josh who will be returning from his mission on October 8th and report that next Sunday. They are all such dear people and so exemplary.

As I fasted today, I gave thanks for the successful completion of this past summer. There has been so much going on in everyone's lives and we have had good health, safety in our travels, good employment, and other tender mercies too numerous to mention. I recognize the Lord's hand in our lives and pray each day that we will each live worthy of His continuing blessings.

September 7, 2013

Today is the last day of the Eastern Idaho State Fair. It's always a busy time in Blackfoot although since Daddy's passing it hasn't been such a frenetic time for me. I was thinking about that on Wednesday when one of my walking buddies, Janeil Albertson, and I worked in the Tiger Ear booth for the 3-7:00 p.m. shift. It was fun to see some of the professionals as well as some of the other volunteers. I remember the days when I would need to stay close to the phone at each shift change in case Daddy needed me to fill in for those who failed to show. It was always a stressful week for Daddy but he worked hard to have the shifts filled and ingredients on hand. It was obvious to me that the new head man doesn't run as "tight a ship" as Daddy did. I would have liked to asked about the "bottom line" but didn't. I saw several things being done that Dad would not have permitted but I reminded myself that I didn't need to worry anymore and so I relaxed and enjoyed my shift.

Melanie Hanni and I walked around the fair on Tuesday morning before the crowds arrived and after a few hours we both were ready to head home. It's been so rainy all week that most days had at least some scattered showers but I doubt it dampened anyone's spirits. Mike and Marci wanted to take the kids but the first time they arrived it was so rainy that they just dropped by here for a visit and then left for home over the protests of the kids who had seen the Ferris wheel as they exited the freeway at the first Blackfoot Exit. They tried again last night and although it was blowing and sprinkling, they all had a great time!

Their first failed attempt was a blessing for SaraKay and me. When SaraKay learned that they were enroute to Blackfoot despite the darkening sky, she commented that she wished Mike would give her a blessing. Although she is doing better with her teaching job, each day is a new challenge and some days it has been difficult to see if she is making progress. Most evenings Stephani calls her and talks over situations and gives advice on ideas for classroom management and that has been a huge help.

SaraKay requested a blessing from Mike and despite the fact that he hadn't brought a white shirt and tie, he gave her a beautiful blessing. He promised her that each day she would see the Lord's tender mercies in her life; that her mind would be clear and she would be able to figure out what needed to be done; that she would see her students as the Lord sees them and she would come to love them and know that her righteous influence would have a profound effect upon them in these developing years. It was a sweet blessing and she is already seeing some of it fulfilled.

I've encouraged her to talk with her principle regarding the difficulty of the room situation as well as the problem of not having adequate funds for music. Much of the music she has borrowed has been too difficult so she is trying to rethink what she can do to help her choir students be successful even though most of them have never sung parts or been in any kind of a choir. She substituted twice this week instead of working as an aide and she commented that classroom management with students who are at desks and doing written work is certainly a different experience than a classroom of 30+ students who are involved in choral activities.

One night she figured up how many weeks she has left before the year is over!! (That was discouraging)

The word from Wellsville is good. Rachel is doing great and is up and around and responding well to the surgery. She has even had a few days when she didn't need any pain medication so she is pretty encouraged. Last week when I was visiting the family I attended one of Chrissy's cross country meets. She has been running all summer in the early morning with some of the team and at one of her first meets she came in 16th, quite a feat considering that there are over 100 girls on their team. This meet was difficult because she has hurt her ankle and although she could still run, she wasn't able to do as well as she previously had. I assured her that any effort at all was impressive to me since running like that has never been something I could do. By the time I run to the end of the driveway, I'm pooped and ready for a rest. My early morning walks even wear me out; I come home with sweat just running down through my hair. Keep up the good work, Chrissy!

By the way, several of the grandchildren are taking advantage of opportunities for sports in their schools. Maddie is on the tennis team and Joseph will be playing on several sports teams now that he is in high school. I wish that I lived close enough to attend some of these events. I loved having several of you siblings playing sports in junior high and high school and getting to attend your events. It was reassuring at the family reunion to see that so many of the family are working out whether it is running, Zumba, lifting weights, walking, dancing, playing tennis, or involvement in team sports. With many of us spending so much time sitting at the computer, it takes a conscious effort to keep fit. Oh, and don't let me forget Ultimate Frisbee. Josh keeps a frisbee with him in his car just in case he can talk anyone into playing with him!

This weekend is a special one for the Olsen's and Larsens of Midland, Michigan. Jenny's sister is going to receive her endowments in the Chicago temple so many of the Cutlers are gathering for that event. Paul and Jenny arrived last night at their parents in Wisconsin and spent this morning with Becky and Jeff before going to the temple. Some of the cousins will be playing together all day and that will be fun for everyone. Becky and Jeff's shipments from Arizona and Detroit arrived and she and Jeff are sorting through it all and making decisions about what to keep and where to put it. Their China crate hasn't arrived yet so when it does that will be the last to unpack. Becky says that she loves their home, their neighborhood, and the schools. Jeff is enjoying his job and life is normalizing for them. What a relief.

I forgot to mention that when Mike and Marci arrived here last night Amber had some scrapes and bruises. She had been riding on Ellie's bike and going down a hill. When she applied the brakes, she was flipped up over the handle bars and onto the pavement. She wasn't wearing a helmet and she scraped up her nose and both arms. Luckily, she didn't hit the tree that she was headed for. They were so grateful. It would have been easy to have had a major head injury with that kind of an accident.

Maybe some of you are aware that a young missionary from Vacaville, California serving in the Blackfoot West Stake was killed in an auto accident on Highway 39. His companion who was driving didn't see a stop sign and pulled out in front of an oncoming pickup. The passenger side of the car was hit. The news stations said he died at the scene but the next day they rescinded that report and said that he was on life support awaiting the arrival of his parents. The Church published a statement saying that he wasn't expected to survive. His parents arrived a day later and he passed away Friday. The whole community has been saddened by this. You just never think that your missionary won't arrive home alive. And then there is the whole other story of the driver and all that he is suffering at this time, too. Just one of those lose-lose situations.

When I went to get my hair cut yesterday Pam had a vase of roses on her work station. I asked about it and she said that Randy gave them to her since this past week has been a very difficult one for her. The military camp in Afghanistan where Scott is serving was bombed last week by two suicide bombers and several of Scott's company were injured and two killed. Fortunately, Scott escaped injury but it really gave Pam and Randy a scare.

Another cause for concern is Brad. He was selected to train as a Blackhawk helicopter pilot and a part of his training is in regards to what they can expect if they are captured and become prisoners of war. They go through intensive training and then the final week they are left somewhere in the wilderness and captured and endure much of what they would if they were actually taken prisoner. The training is so intense that at the conclusion the soldier's family is flown in to greet him. The wives are trained on how to

deal with helping their husbands recover from the mock experience. The man training the wives tells them that after what the soldiers have endured, they will have "bruised souls" and need strong emotional support. Of course, this has been so distressing to Pam that she has hardly been able to sleep knowing that Brad is in harm's way. My heart aches for her and if any of you have the time, please include Brad in your prayers this week. I live in such a protected bubble that I forget there is a very scary and ugly part of life out there.

I had quite a day yesterday. I was planning all week to help Melanie finish up her corn patch but with all the rain we couldn't get out in her garden so I figured the opportunity had passed. Thursday night Melanie called and said that she wouldn't be able to do the corn Friday but that if I wanted to clean off the rest of it I could have it. I mentioned this to Janiel Albertson and Janet Jenks when we walked Friday morning and Janeil said that she would like a little and so we went over after our walk to clean off the patch. Well, an hour later we had two wheelbarrows and eight garbage bags full of corn! We couldn't believe it. We gave Hanni's all that they wanted and delivered corn to Pam Cox and Sharon Moss and I saved a large bag for Mike and Marci who were coming that afternoon. Janeil saved some for her family but ended up with about eight dozen ears for herself which she went home and froze. Reed helped me wheel my orange wheelbarrow which was filled to overflowing with corn back across his lawn, over the small bridge at the ditch and into my garage. So began my day's effort of shucking, boiling, cutting, and freezing corn. By the time evening arrived every muscle in my body ached. I remembered then why I quit raising a garden when Daddy died and all of you kids were unavailable!

Do you have time for one more experience? When I was walking Wednesday Sandra Shelley mentioned that Tami Going was in a coma and expected to die any time. I have been away so long that I've lost two years of news of the community and I didn't know that Tami had cancer and was in such bad shape. She passed away on Friday. Most of you won't remember Tami but she is one of Stephani's classmates. She is mentally challenged and so has had a difficult life. Whenever she sees me, she runs up and gives me a big hug and asks about Stephani and then she tells me about her life and what she has been doing. I always see her at stake conference but rarely see her at other times so I really had no way of knowing that she was ill. Last year during a routine check-up she was diagnosed; the cancer had spread throughout her body. Remembering that Daddy was comatose just before he passed, I didn't want to go visit Tami because I remember how much we wanted Daddy's last days to be spent with us.

This morning just before I awoke, I had a dream about Tami. We were somewhere together and we visited and had a wonderful time. I remember wondering during the dream about how Tami could still visit with me when she was dead but nevertheless the visit was sweet and then she laid down on a couch and I covered her with a blanket to keep her warm. That was the dream. I awoke and felt this sweet peace about her and knew that she would understand that I loved her and would miss her. It was such a short dream but was one of those tender mercies I have received since my mission that assures me that the Lord can make up for the time that I was away and that it really isn't an issue in His eyes. I might mention that Tami would always ask about Stephani and say that she was so good to her. That pleased me.

I had another similar comment about Becky this week. I was changing Becky's name on one of my beneficiary forms and the agent commented that Becky was always so good to her son, Jason, when he was having such a struggle in high school. I know that I shouldn't have my identity through my children, but it is very satisfying to hear of my children's good works.

September 16, 2013

It's a beautiful fall day outside. Most of the grain harvest is over and the "official" spud harvest begins a week from today. The weather has been mild and pleasant except for some wind last weekend. I've been busy and have ignored the yard work that is calling to me. Hopefully this week I'll have some time to address some of the weeds that have taken over my garden area. Usually by this time we've had a good frost that arrests the growth of all the weeds but it's been unseasonably warm and weeds seem to be going strong. I'm thinking of putting in some bushes in my front flower garden and simplifying my life.

Monday I made a quick trip to SLC to a mission reunion for the senior missionaries of the D.C. North Mission. It was held at Pres. Matsumori's home in Murray and my trusty GPS got me there. I tried to think of someone in the area that would be attending that I could carpool with but there

really wasn't anyone so I just put aside my fears and made the trip alone. I knew that I would be gone for the regular reunion at October General Conference and felt like this may be the only time I would have to renew those friendships. Sister Brown made the trip from St.George and so we had each other for support. President and Sister Matsumori were just released in July so they're going through an adjustment after being gone for the last three years. Their home was beautiful and they were gracious, as usual. What fun to get together!

I had arranged to spend the night with Kathy following the reunion and arrived about nine at her home. We spent most of the time talking through our upcoming trip to Israel. She was way ahead of me regarding her preparations and she gave me a lot of good ideas about what to take. I haven't had time to even think of it but after our visit I promised myself that I would get going on my preparations. So, for part of last week I scoured the tour information, making notes to myself regarding what I need to do and buy and get gathered. I took care of an eye appointment, ordered glasses, saw the dentist, did some shopping and got ready for my big weekend hosting Linda, Lin, and Frankie.

On Friday we hosted the full-time missionaries and Hanni's for dinner. SaraKay and I can't have the Elders in our home without other male adults present so I invited Reed and Melanie. As SaraKay helped me make the final preparations she talked about some of the awkward dinner appointments she had as a missionary. I told her that I always get nervous about hosting missionaries and she commented that she couldn't understand why since the missionaries are so appreciative and accepting of whatever a family comes up with. She said that many times people would just hand them money and tell them to pick something up at a restaurant which was difficult if it was a Sunday. They also had plenty of times when they arrived for dinner to discover that the family had forgotten (no phones so they couldn't contact them in advance.) On those occasions they went on their way hungry. She concluded with reminding me that anything we provide is better than nothing and to quit worrying.

On Saturday I drove to Downey and met Stephani who brought Linda, Lin, and Frankie to stay with me for the weekend. I have been wanting to have them come stay but finding a free weekend has been the challenge. After saying good-bye to Stephani, we drove leisurely back home and I gave them a bit of a commentary on the sights in Idaho. It was fun to introduce them to SaraKay and have the evening to visit and get better acquainted. Sunday they attended Church with us and created quite a stir. The ward members were so sweet to come up and get acquainted and Lin and Frankie found their classes while Linda attended her adult meetings even though I wasn't with her. I know the ward members were good to her and she had a great time.

Following our meetings and dinner I drove them back to Logan. It was a beautiful trip with the high billowing clouds and the shadows on the hills, highlighting the unique geological features of the area. Several times the girls commented on the beautiful mountains and the spectacular skies. It pleased me to hear their comments and acknowledgement of the beauties here in the West. Even though there's a lot of sagebrush and junipers between here and Logan, there is also a lot of gorgeous scenery and beautifully cultivated fields which bear testimony of the goodness and tenacity of the area farmers.

All the way home Linda was coughing and spitting up mucus. I could tell during sacrament meeting that she was struggling to keep from coughing and she kept it under control pretty well but she paid the price later and had a miserable time with all the mucous build-up. I was grateful to get them delivered home safe and sound. I know that this transition from life in Maryland to life in Utah has been hard on Linda but I think that Lin and Frankie are thriving and doing well in school. They have lots of good friends and their ward has been very welcoming. Some days Linda is ready to pack up and head east but the girls seem to be happy with their situation. Keep them in your prayers.

September 23, 2013

It's nearly four o'clock and I should be hearing from SaraKay soon. She finishes up at school at four but usually doesn't arrive home until after five as she stays at school to take care of business or goes to Chesbros to buy supplies and music. Although there hasn't been a huge improvement in her situation, she has adjusted her expectations of what her choirs will be able to achieve and feels that day by day she is winning the students over and it is helping the overall situation. One time, after a difficult day she commented, "My lofty goals for the year have fled. I'm just trying to not "emotionally scar" anyone by the year's end.

On Friday she received permission to miss the weekly inservice at her charter school and instead drove to Logan to observe Stephani's classroom and to pick up some pointers on classroom management. She was up at 5:00 and enroute by six, arriving at the school by 8:00. She thoroughly enjoyed watching Stephani teach during her morning classes. I knew that it would be a treat for SaraKay to watch Steph. She is a master teacher and keeps the kids interested and engaged.

One thing that also really impressed SaraKay was that the school had school-wide "procedures" in place for everything from discipline to handing in assignments. The kids followed instructions and many of the transitions that are such a problem in SaraKay's classes were handled quietly and quickly due to the procedures. The Einstein Charter School has been in existence for 10 years and Steph said that from what she has heard of those early years, it just takes a while for a charter school to get up and running. The Odyssey Charter school is in its first year of existence and some of the problems that have plagued it are due to lack of organization and experience. It's getting a little better but there has been a loss of both students and teachers this first month due to all the problems.

Friday afternoon SaraKay slipped into the music classes and tried to pick up some pointers from the choral teacher. Stephani had mentioned to her that the music teacher was very laid back and SaraKay came away agreeing with that assessment. She said the teacher's choice of music was poor for the age group, the class was out of control, and although this was the teacher's 10th year teaching, she put up with a lot of guff (is that a word?) Anyway, it proved to be an interesting day for her and also lots of fun after school was over and she joined Steph and Kate at home for a fun evening. Later Josh invited her to play an ultimate frisbee pick-up game on one of the fields at USU and that was truly amazing as well as challenging. She has been so stiff and sore these last couple of days that she winces every time she moves.

Life in Moreland certainly doesn't have the excitement of life in a college town. When all her friends and boyfriends left town to return to college, all the fun came to a screeching halt. SaraKay tells herself that she is too busy to be doing a lot of partying anyway but when the weekends hit, she hates the lack of activities. She is so grateful that she at least has the play (Forty-second Street) to keep some fun in her schedule. This week's rehearsals will be interesting. The leading man is the director's son and he returns from his mission on Wednesday. The play includes a lot of tap dancing and that has really been enjoyable for her and the other cast members. The Blackfoot Community Players who sponsor the play each year have a room full of costumes so I won't be doing a lot of shopping and altering of costumes like I used to.

Rachel's surgery went beautifully and at her follow-up appointment this past week the doctor told her that everything was healing well and that he wouldn't need to see her until later in November. She said the back pain is gone and she is feeling wonderful!

Andrea said that Anna Sue is thoroughly enjoying her BYU experience and Laurel is in good health and thriving in Honduras. Andrea commented on the downsizing that is going on in their household with Anna and Laurel gone and that it has been surprising to see how much additional laundry and other resources each child consumes to say nothing of the emotional energy. I remember going through that as my nest emptied. Our families usually grow so naturally that we don't even realize the load that we are carrying until each child leaves home and then we can see it.

Becky and Jeff continue to get boxes emptied and look forward to the day when they feel like everything has a place and is in its place. The kids are settling in and finding friends and it's been such a blessing to have the schools and church just a short distance from their home.

Stephani continues to work with Linda and the girls. Linda has been very up and down about life, sometimes being totally irrational, but Stephani and family seem to have unlimited patience with the situation and continue to show concern and compassion. Linds' grandmother Lucy, has been hovering near death this past week and they continue to travel to Provo to show support to Linds' mom who is caring for Lucy. She is a grand lady and has held a very special place in Linds' life over the years.

When I visited with Shauntel she mentioned that Archie has been doing well on the teams he's playing on and that it's been fun to watch him shine.

I enjoyed Laurel's blog but could empathize with the lice incident. What a nightmare! I remember

one time a couple of years ago when Cordon and Sara Wray's six boys all arrived at church with their heads shaved. The little ones didn't seem to care but the two oldest boys were very chagrined. Apparently there had been some problems with lice at school and so Sara and Cordon decided to avoid the problem and just shave everyone's head. Now there's a solution for you!

When I talked to Mike he sounded so sick! He has a terrible cold but wasn't going to let that keep him home from the Utah/BYU game Saturday night. I'm sure that game didn't make him feel much better.

Paul had a birthday but he and I played phone tag until Sunday night. When I tried to catch him Saturday Jenny said that he had taken the three oldest kids on a backpacking trip. Today was an inservice day for the teachers in the Midland School District so they had a day to get recovered. Paul's year-end reports and job assessments were due this week so he's had some stressful days at work but feels good about what he's been doing and enjoys Dow.

This past week was a big one for Tim, too, with all the tax deadlines, but he was in good spirits and looking forward to Saturday's game with Steve and Mike.

I spent a lot of last week getting things ready for my trip to Israel. I will drive to Layton next Wednesday, October 2rd, stay the night with Deniece and Don, and then they will drive us to the airport for an 11 o'clock flight to New York and then all night on to Tel Aviv. My return trip will get me flying into SLC the afternoon of the 16th. I haven't figured out my phone situation yet but I have left contact information with Stephani.

October 2, 2013

I've spent the last couple of days packing, reading through instructions from "Israel Revealed," and repacking my suitcases. I've made several trips to Walmart and been gathering everything from treats and small plastic snack bags to power converters. Yesterday I bought a new camera and spent part of the day reading through instructions and trying to get it charged and ready to go. Several of you have called or sent emails wishing me well in this venture and most of you have told me to just relax and thoroughly enjoy myself. I think that once I'm on my way I'll be okay but there has been a lot I wanted to get done before my departure.

I suspect that when I return there won't be too many pleasant fall days left so I've especially wanted to get the yard work completed. When I picked some of my apples last week, I realized too late that most of them were just too green and so I've got two heavily laden trees that SaraKay will need to pick while I am gone. The garden area has been an eyesore with the tall, scraggly red root weeds dominating the area between the garden and the road. Last week I spent three days trying to get the area cleaned off so that it looked decent. By the second day I realized that I really needed to have someone come in with a tiller and break up some of the remaining morning glory that was carpeting it. I looked in the want ads and found a Travis Hall who hired out to till gardens and I called him and he came on Wednesday and for $45 rototilled the entire area and left it looking wonderful.

Travis was a sweet guy and before he was through, he asked me if I had a set of twins, Stephen and David. I said that I did and he said that he was their age in school and thought they were "very fine boys". Travis was so pleasant and sweet to me and although I didn't ask him about it, I knew that a couple of years ago he had a son who was run over by a car and killed. It's hard to imagine how difficult life would be when you have that kind of a sorrow but I'm sure that Travis made a conscious decision to cheerfully extend himself to those around him; at least he certainly did to me.

This past week I received two videos from Shauntel and Andrea. One was of Arch making a touchdown on his football team and the other was of Chantelle doing a tumbling routine of flips and jumps. What fun for me to be a part of my grandkid's lives and activities.

SaraKay is doing better with her teaching. Although each day brings new challenges, she seems to be over the worst and she has had some pretty good days these last two weeks. She has also had some positive feedback from a member of the Odessey School Board and others which has been encouraging. When she arrives home each day, she has lots of stories, some really funny and some not so funny, but I think that she is progressing in her abilities and bonding with the kids. She is also enjoying the play that she is participating in, "42nd Street". She has several scenes with tap dancing which she loves and a couple of solos. I'm grateful that she has something to keep her occupied. She misses the social life of the college scene.

Later this year she is supposed to help with the drama production that the school will be performing so this opportunity to perform again will help her sharpen her drama skills. On Sunday she attended our ward and performed, "This Is The Christ" for a special musical number. I had lots of compliments on it although she didn't get to hear them since she left early to attend a sacrament meeting at a Pocatello rest home where the singles were presenting the sacrament meeting program.

When Marci called the other night, she asked about some of the locations and sites that we would be visiting. She spent a semester abroad in Jerusalem and so I told her that I would include in this letter a list of some of the places we will be. Some of these are familiar but some mean very little to me but to Jenny, Katie, and Marci who have visited Israel, they will have significance.

October 16, 2013

It's 3:30 a.m. and I'm wide awake and can't get my eyes to close and my mind to shut down. I guess I'll get started on this letter and make good use of this "jet lag" time. First let me again express condolences to Bonnie on the loss of her father. I have not had time to visit with her or Jean since returning so I don't know the particulars of Morris's passing, but he has been a devoted high priest and patriarch and an example to everyone who met him of goodness and "enduring to the end". I'm sure that their family had a bitter/sweet experience as they laid him to rest. His legacy will continue as his righteous posterity carry on and on and on!

I thought that I would give an overview of my Holy Land experience. The tour guide, Daniel Rona, calls this tour "An Experience of a Lifetime" and as I went throughout the 10 days I agreed with that title. It truly was an inspirational and educational opportunity! Daniel is a Jew, holding dual citizenship in both Israel and the United States and has a unique ability to tie together both the Jewish and LDS viewpoints since he is also a Mormon. He has been a guide for over 40 years and has personally guided more LDS tours than the other Holy Land guides combined. He has had the unique opportunity to take President Kimball, Faust, and Lee and other General Authorities on tours and their insights and comments were included in Daniel's dialogue as we visited the areas. He has established the Ensign Foundation and is actively involved in the Israeli and U.S. relations. He is an endowed member of the Church and talked about the similarities of the temple worship of the Jews and their implications. Everyone on the tour was endowed, and had that common background so Daniel was able to teach without giving the details of the endowment but allowing each of us to think upon the importance of the temple in the Jewish religion. It was fascinating to get insights into the religious, secular, and political situation and to think about the Second Coming and the part Jerusalem will play in that final great drama!

After spending time touring in D.C. on my mission I remember how difficult it was to tour for hours on end, standing and walking from one exhibit to another. Daniel's approach was different and perfect for a group of mostly retirees whose physical limitations would have made it difficult to stand in the heat for hours every day. Daniel used headsets and ear buds given to each participant at the beginning of the tour so as we moved from area to area, we could hear clearly the explanations of the site and keep track of each other. The Holy Land's primary industry is tourism and so everywhere we went was thronged with tourists. Having the headsets allowed us a great deal of freedom and a wonderful commentary. He also provided small canvas/pipe stools that could easily be carried over the shoulder when not in use but set up in seconds at whatever site was selected for further instruction. We also were provided with umbrellas since it was in the upper 80's for most of our trip and several of the sites were in the desert areas and hot and dusty. There were 23 in our group including my sister, Kathy, Charles and Brenda, Deniece and Don, Don's brother and his wife, Darwin and Bonnie Cheney, and Sister Brown and me. It was so fun to share this wonderful time together!

We caught the tour bus each morning at the front of the hotel (7:15) after a quick breakfast in the hotel cafeteria, toting passports, $$, bags, cameras, guide books, scriptures (or ipads), jackets, and any other items that were needed for the day's activities. A lunch was provided for each day and we usually returned to the hotel early evening although some nights it was later. We ate dinner at the hotel so it was very convenient for us and the food was delicious. Just to give you an idea of the buffet each night, there were about 20 different fresh vegetable dishes and four or five entree's offered with each meal besides breads, spreads, and desserts! After a day of walking up and down stairs or hiking up and down the

hillsides toting all our paraphernalia, we were exhausted and ready to retire early each night.

Although most of the famous sites were crowded, Daniel had a knack of leading us to some secluded place, where we could sit comfortably and he could instruct us without all the background noise and commotion that was present at each location we visited. We were instructed that at many of the sites we were to be dressed modestly with knees and shoulders covered since both the Jewish and Muslim sites required this. Here are some of the highlights of our trip:

We arrived Saturday afternoon after spending 27 hours in airports and on flights, the one leg of the journey from New York to Tel Aviv taking 11 hours. It was the Jewish Sabbath from nightfall on Friday to nightfall on Saturday. We settled in, received all of our instructions and materials for touring, name tags, room keys, and other items. Daily and hourly itineraries were given out. The distribution of luggage and dinner and introductions with entire tour group took most of the evening. Our guide book described Israel as a young nation built on an ancient inheritance. The city is the crossroads of the East and has Christian, Islam, and Jewish traditions. It is a country that is about 50 years old going on to five thousand years old and has been conquered about 30 times by vying civilizations!

Sunday: Toured the Mount of Olives and viewed a large model of the city of Jerusalem with Daniel pointing out the sacred sites. Toured Dead Sea Scrolls Museum as well as journeying to Bethlehem. Studied the story of David and Goliath and Sampson and visited the valley of Elah where David fought Goliath.

Monday: Visited the Temple Mount which is presently under Muslim rule. Saw the school rooms with boys being instructed in the Koran. Walked the temple complex and instructed in where the various things took place including the Dome of the Rock (which we were not permitted to enter because of recent problems between Muslims and Jews.) Talked about the temple in the Savior’s Day, the pinnacle, the rites, and the Jews determination to someday rebuild it. While we toured Temple Square we saw large groups of Muslim women meeting and studying the Koran. Two of our group who were wearing cut-offs were not permitted to tour with us until they purchased large shawls which they wrapped around their waists in order to cover their knees. Went to the western wall on the outside of the temple and observed several young 13-year-old Jewish boys performing the reading of the Torah for their bar mitzvah's. It was a grand affair for each young man whose family helped him celebrate. The women watched the proceedings over the division wall that separated the women from the men. Hundreds of Jews also approached the Western Wall and stuffed little papers into the crevices in the wall with names written on them: a Jewish prayer roll. The people make loud singing (or mourning) sounds as they recite their prayers hence the wall is often called the Wailing Wall although it is the act of praying that evokes the loud sounds at the wall.

The Western Wall was one of my favorite places. It was so sweet to see the men of the family escort their young sons as they went through these rituals and passed to manhood. The extended families were dressed in Sunday best and some had hired professional musicians to play for the occasion which added a festive air. The Jewish children are beautiful and seeing the solidarity of the family was sweet. The whole affair was so interesting. Daniel mentioned that the Jewish religion makes no pretense of having the priesthood. They know that without the priesthood they are not able to officiate in the ordinances of the temple and so they continue to wait for the visit of Elijah and the return of the keys so they can once again receive the temple ordinances. The Western Wall is the closest the people can come to the Holy of Holies for now.

That afternoon we hiked in the hills of Bethlehem and for a time we all crowded into one of the limestone caves that was used by "shepherds abiding in the fields". The entire area around Jerusalem and Bethlehem is so rocky and there is an abundance of limestone caves that dot the hillsides. We sat on the brow of the hill by the sheepfold and learned about the Savior's birth and Isaiah's prophecies. We sang Christmas carols and took pictures of that pastoral setting.

That evening we visited the National Diamond Center and learned that Israel is the world's leader in the exportation of diamonds. Also learned that there is a beautiful gem that is mined only in Israel.

Tuesday we visited the Orson Hyde Park on the hillside in Jerusalem and reviewed the story of the dedication of the nation to the return of the Jews. Daniel read the dedicatory prayer that Elder Hyde gave on that occasion. We learned that

there is an upper and lower part of Jerusalem and that the "upper room" where the Passover was held may not have been a second story room but merely a room in the upper quarters of the city. We visited Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives and also visited the house of Caiaphas, the chief high priest, at the time of the Savior's crucifixion. We also visited the Garden Tomb and took pictures not only of the area but were permitted to enter the tomb and see the two chambers, the mourning room and the chamber where His body was laid. Although we had hoped for a quieter situation the tomb area was full of tourists, many of them being rather boisterous high school groups who were touring together. Part way through that experience all of the groups sat in a benched area adjacent to the tomb and performed musical numbers for each other. It appeared to be some sort of choral exchange and so it was nice for us to hear the groups performing.

Wednesday: Visited the Mount of Transfiguration and toured a beautiful church that had been built and maintained by the Franciscan Friers of the Catholic Church. Had a hair-raising experience as the van driver made a speedy trip up the mountainside road which had 18 switchbacks and no safety rails to protect us from toppling down the steep sides. Went to the Sea of Galilee and had lunch at a wonderful, open-air restaurant on the shores of the sea. Later went out on a touring boat and rehearsed the stories of that favorite place of the Savior's. Saw the location of the area where Christ cast the legions out of a man who dwelt in the limestone caves and cast the evil spirits into a herd of swine who subsequently ran over a cliff into the sea.

Thursday: Rode along the West Bank, the Golan Heights and saw the rich valleys filled with orchards of date palm trees, oranges, avocados, pomegranates, figs, apples, tomatoes, and observed their farming practices such as covering large orchards with huge light tarps that help the soil maintain its moisture. Came to understand why this area is such a valuable asset to the nation that owns it. Identified the various towns and villages that are mentioned in the scriptures. Passed through various checkpoints that required inspections by machine-gun-toting soldiers.

Friday: Went to Nazareth, the area of Armageddon, the city of Haifa and Caesarea where Herod built a magnificent city on the coast. Saw the ancient engineering that enabled the people to bring fresh water to the coastal city via huge stone viaducts. Stood on the beaches and waded into the beautiful waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Saturday: Attended worship services at the LDS Jerusalem Center. Took lots of pictures of the seven-story building that house worship services in a large auditorium with floor to ceiling windows giving a spectacular view of the holy city and temple square. Met the missionary couples who manage the facility. Most of the 80 students who live there were touring Turkey for the weekend with their professors so there was a very small attendance at the block of meetings. Enjoyed meeting with the women in Relief Society and participating in the lesson which was capably given by a Bolivian young woman who is in Jerusalem because her husband is Israeli. Walked the well-groomed grounds and saw replicas of olive presses and grist mills. Returned to the hotel to change and went shopping in the Arab quarter of the city. Spent several hours visiting the shops and buying keepsakes.

Sunday: Drove to Qumran by the Dead Sea and talked about the Dead Sea Scrolls which were the records of the Essenes who were a religious group who had all things in common. A scroll of every book of the Old Testament except the Book of Esther was found in the caves in the vicinity of their community. The ruins of their desert home show evidence of baptism by immersion and the scrolls included the entire book of Isaiah. Their records are 1000 years older than any other Hebrew biblical text! Toured Masada, an ancient fortress on top of a tall mountainous plateau which originally was a summer palace of Herod the Great. Rode a cable car to the top of the 1500-foot facility and walked among impressive ruins. Learned about the 950 Zealots who fled Jerusalem and held off the Roman army for three years in the Masada fortress, eventually dying rather than being taken prisoner. Went to a Dead Sea resort and swam in the sea which is 28% salt. Interesting to see the topography of the region and learn about a coming day when the area would be miraculously "healed". In Hebrew the name of the sea is translated "Great Salt Lake".

Sunday evening, we visited over dinner and said our good-byes to many of the tour group who were not traveling back to Utah with us. Sunday evening we arrived at the airport around 9:00 p.m. and it took until nearly midnight to get tickets and go

through several security checks. Our flight departed at 12:40 a.m. and we flew throughout the night, arriving in New York at 5:00 a.m. accounting for the time changes, a flight of 11 and 1/2 hours. It felt good to get back to American soil and be able to telephone our families without regard to international charges. After standing in customs and security lines for nearly two hours we finally arrived at our boarding gate and then waited an additional couple of hours for our flight to Utah. We were all looking and feeling pretty frazzled by the time our plane touched down in Salt Lake City at 2:00 pm following a five-hour flight.

Well, that is it in a nutshell. Some of you have asked if it was all that I had hoped for. Yes, it was that and more. It was especially sweet to share the experience with family and renew those associations. I'm trying to catch my breath now that I'm home and get done the things that are pressing. Thanks to all of you who helped SaraKay. She got along great and had the house nice and clean when I arrived. She's doing better with her teaching although she's decided that it won't ever be easy, but maybe manageable. Her first concert is tomorrow so she is sweating that.

November 4, 2013

It's snowing outside this evening. It started earlier today and has been a beautiful, quiet beginning to our upcoming winter weather. As I looked out the window just now, I noticed that the sky in the west is a deep blue and there are even patches where the sun has broken through and is shining, maybe doing its best to dispel the winter gloom. Normally the winter weather isn't too much of a worry to me since I can usually stay home and let things settle before venturing out but this year, with SaraKay driving back and forth from Idaho Falls every day, we're both worrying about slick roads and blizzard conditions! We need to quit worrying and just take it a day at a time.

I returned today from a trip to Boise and visits with both Tim and David and Andrea and bunch. Dave and Andrea have been a part of the committee for the Boise Stake 100 Years Celebration. Their responsibility was to come up with a presentation for the Primary children to perform as a part of a bigger production involving all the quorums and auxiliaries and highlighting the past 100 years of Church growth in the Boise area. They had a dress rehearsal on Wednesday night so I was given directions to the Egyptian Theatre in downtown Boise and the time that I needed to be there. I arrived (thanks to my trusty GPS) but it took some navigating and even asking for help before I found my way out of the parking garage and on to the theater. I was relieved to find David and Andrea and did what they told me to do to help organize the children as they arrived so they would be in place for their performance. I sat with McKay on one side and Nathan on the other and helped keep some of the 100 Primary children under control as the rehearsal progressed. Then it was the children's turn and they proudly marched to the front of the large auditorium and up the steps to the stage following Moroni and Helaman, with flags waving and performed a rousing rendition of "Armies of Helaman". They were all costumed in off-white linen tunics with matching sashes and headbands and David and Andrea had really gotten them pumped up and excited about it all! After a couple more run-throughs of their part on the program, they returned to the balcony and we all watched as the show got under way for a full- house performance.

Despite the fact that the children had been sitting for hours, by the time they went on as the final act they were still enthusiastic and did a great job portraying the stripling warriors. It was a long night but the program was well done and inspirational. It was fun to see Dave and Andrea in action and to feel the love and admiration that they evoke from members of their stake. I loved being a part of it.

The rest of the week was filled with parties and social engagements, Halloween preparations, and spending time with the kids. Chantelle gave me a private showing of some gymnastics routines and demonstrated some of her cheerleading routines and flips. McKay and Nathan read to me and I even got to attend one of Nathan's basketball games on Saturday. Joseph and a friend set up a mini spook alley in the front of their home making it challenging for the trick or treaters to get to the candy which put me in mind of all the booby traps that you boys used to set up at our home for the goblins on Halloween all those years ago. The whole household was in a festive mood as friends of Joseph and Chantelle's arrived. Andrea had purchased jailbird jumpsuits for her and David and they took the three youngest around the neighborhood, visiting with other neighbors as they went door to door.

On Friday noon I met Tim in the new Scentsy office building in Meridian and he took me to lunch in their new cafeteria. Although we didn't have time to tour the lower-level shops, there was a mini

shopping mall and barber shop as well as work out rooms and other conveniences for the employees. It was really enjoyable to be introduced to many of Tim's coworkers and to even get to meet the head honcho, Orville, who was in the cafeteria with part of his family. Several of the employees complimented Tim and I could see that he was highly thought of among his work associates. We intended to see Tim's new office on the fifth floor but all visitors were banned from the top floors due to construction that was still going on. Tim will move into the new building this next Tuesday.

On Saturday evening while Dave and Andrea had another big performance at their stake center, Islay and I were treated to a delicious meal at Tim's. He had invited the full-time Sister missionaries who serve in his singles ward to dinner. Tim grilled teriyaki and barbecue chicken, fixed a delicious spinach salad with lots of trimmings, and a sweet potato casserole with an orange/chili powder/brown sugar sauce that was delicious. The sister missionaries were impressed and commented later that they have had some very bizarre meals with the YSA meal assignments but this was one of their favorites. We got a good laugh over that with them. Islay had a great time, too, watching "How to Train Your Dragon" and by jumping from couch to couch when the movie was over. It was sweet to have some one-on-one time with Tim. When it was time to go, Islay objected, she'd had such a great time!

The week prior to that I was in Logan and had the chance to visit Stephani and Linds, Linda and girls, and Steve and Bonnie. I had intended to have some time with Linda on Thursday afternoon but she and James were job hunting so I went to Linda's about 3:00 when the girls came home from school with Stephani and then we all drove to the dance studio in downtown Provo. Although we didn't sit in on their entire lesson, we did get to see the last 20 minutes or so and it was fun to get a preview of their upcoming dance recital. Both Lin and Frankie are natural dancers and it was obvious how much they enjoyed it. Of course, Linda was very proud of them and it was fun for me to get to see all that they have been learning.

After the recital rehearsal we dropped off James and Linda and took Lin and Frankie to Steph's to carve pumpkins and have supper. Steph had prepared a delicious pork barbecue and salads for supper and then the carving began. Stephani had all the right tools as well as patterns and enormous home-grown pumpkins for the eager participants. I was amazed at the creative jack-o-lanterns that everyone came up with. Linds's really took the grand prize, though. He had carved an actual head out of his pumpkin. It looked like something that had been sculptured in stone! Eventually he carved a nail that went through the skull and gave it a truly Frankenstein-ish look! As the evening was winding down, Lin and Frankie mentioned that this was their first experience carving a pumpkin! It made me grateful for all the wonderful experiences that they are having because of their ongoing associations with the Bennions. Of course, it was an added bonus to have Josh and Kate a part of things! Kate is continuing her job hunt but in the meantime is working at the "Scarehouse" a spook alley sponsored by Steve's boss, Scott Hoskinson.

Which brings me to my visit with Steve and Bonnie. On Friday afternoon I went with Steve and Rachel for a "behind the scenes" visit to the famous "Scarehouse." I've never been much into "fright" so we went in the afternoon and Steve and Rachel took me through the mazes in the big building with all the spooky places and then outside behind the warehouse where other special features were set up. It was fun to see the "control room" that displayed pictures of the entire spook alley route and that enabled the master controller to pull switches that activated all kinds of zombies and goblins to scare the customers. Rachel said that at first she wasn't sure she would enjoy her job working there but after a while it was quite satisfying giving the customers a good scare!

That night Nathan and several of his friends hosted a "murder/mystery party" and invited some girls to join them. Bonnie prepared a delicious pan of homemade lasagna and I helped with other things and the boys worked for a couple of hours fixing up the house for the party. At six o'clock sharp we abandoned the party and Steve, Bonnie, and me and the kids, (Rachel was working) settled in for the BYU/Boise game. I normally don't get to watch the games so it was especially fun to share that with Steve and his family. It was also fun to be a part of all the Halloween festivities. Saturday morning Rachel left at 6:30 for an event in Salt Lake with a friend and Nate had his ACT and was gone early, too. I forget how busy life is with a house full of kids. It was a treat for me to share in it all!

(Monday morning) Saturday I drove to Salt Lake and had dinner with my high school friends at the

Gardner Village in West Jordan. It was a great place to be on the Saturday before Halloween with all the festivities that were going on. It was sweet to be with my friends and visit over lunch. Our lives are surprisingly similar and it is wonderful to see how good and capable they each are. I was grateful that I went. It is always difficult to go since I travel alone. I left for home about three and got here just as SaraKay was leaving for her activity. She is heavily involved right now with her "42nd Street" play. Some of you have asked about it. I'm sure you can buy tickets at the door. We don't expect any of you to come since it's winter and the weather is unsettled. If you want to come let us know and I'll get tickets.

November 10, 2013

I took this past week to get things organized and ready to start working on another Larsen Legacy book. I can't believe that I've been home for nearly six months and I'm only now feeling like there's time to start this project. I can't complain. The past few months with lots of family interaction is just what I needed to feel connected again.

As I look back over the past months, I am so grateful for the many tender mercies our extended family has received. The other day in a phone conversation with Becky she told me of an experience she had while dealing with one of the children. She was feeling discouraged and praying in her heart that she would find answers to the situation. The answers came, so distinctly and surely that she knew the Lord was aware and that He was guiding her in her "mothering". I'm sure that each of you have had similar experiences. I know that I have. It amazes me sometimes how completely my prayers are answered even if they have only been said in the silent chambers of my heart.

I remember a situation years ago with Shauntel and Randy. They were praying for a family but it didn't seem that the Lord was listening. Stake conference was coming and Shauntel was asked to play the organ for the Sunday session. She was pleased with the opportunity despite the fact that she was going through a tough time. Randy reassured her that the Lord was aware of her and he commented that he was grateful for her and her many talents. That Sunday morning after the conference session the stake president approached her at the organ and complimented her on her beautiful music and willingness to serve and share her talents. What he said was so close to what Randy had said that she suspected that Randy had confided in the stake president that she was struggling and that was why he complimented her.

As they drove home, she questioned Randy about it and he assured her that he hadn't mentioned their conversation to anyone. Shauntel recognized that Randy and the stake president, separate and apart, had delivered to her a message from the Lord: that she was loved and that she was in the Lord's watch care; that He knew her and in his own time and way, she would receive the righteous desires of her heart. I've had similar situations when I've pleaded for something and the desired result wasn't forthcoming but other witnesses were given that reaffirmed to me the Lord's love and awareness.

SaraKay is closing in on her performances. This past week was spent helping her get costumes ready. Although the theater costume closet had several outfits that worked well for her, all of them needed some modification if only sewing on buttons and adjusting the hem lines. In the finale she is supposed to wear a very glamorous evening gown. The director found the dress she thought was perfect for the part and SaraKay came home with it. It was a beautiful dress but needed a number of alterations including adding additional fabric to the skirt for it to fit. That was reasonably easy but the top was the challenge since it was so bare. At first, we thought we could just add a black bolo jacket but when we got one it didn't look good. Back to the drawing board. There wasn't enough of a strap on the top to even add a simple sleeve to it even though I had found some matching fabric at a store in Idaho Falls. Every time we'd think we might have found a solution we would later discover that it wouldn't work for some reason.

One night SaraKay was moaning and groaning about the issue and she started going through every "t" in her wardrobe, trying different colors and necklines and we finally came up with one that was a reasonably good fit. The more we looked at it the more we felt that it would work for her. I was so relieved since I had already spent considerable time trying every other possible idea. I was so grateful that a simple solution was found and I didn't have to labor over it all week. Yesterday they had a dress rehearsal (for 10 hours) and she was happy to report that nearly everything we prepared was "spot on". Hallelujah! The first performance (family only) is Thursday so I guess we are going to get this going

and done in the next two weeks. It has been a lot of work and fun for her and helped give her something to look forward to.

Several of you have asked about her job. She told me the other day that although not a lot has changed with her situation, she has simplified what she is teaching. One day she came home and commented that the kids are becoming better about tackling some of the repertoire that is a little difficult whereas at the first of the semester they complained about anything they didn't like. She is loving the kids and had her first parent-teacher conferences this week. She had prepared lots of good things to compliment the kids on since she suspects some of them have little to be complimented on in other classes and she wanted the parents to be encouraged about their son or daughter. What a disappointment when only 8 parents came to visit her in the two hours that were set apart for the conferences. This first year of teaching has really been an interesting: a dose of reality of the challenges in education today. She has signed up to take her graduate school entrance exam in December and will apply to a program in January that begins in June.

I continue to enjoy my Sunbeam class. I have adopted a little routine that has worked well. When we first go to class one of the Primary presidency takes half the class and I take the other half to go to the bathroom and to get a drink. That gives the kids a break from sitting and shortens my class time a little. Then when they are back in the room, I give them some apple slices to eat while we begin the lesson. It's amazing how quiet they can be while eating apples and since I have had such a bumper crop this year it's been nice for me to share my bounty with them. Anyway, I got up this morning and cut up the apples and stuck them in the frig to keep them as fresh as possible until I left at 9:30. You guessed it. I forgot the apples and didn't think of them until I was in class and looked in my box for them. I had to admit to the class that I had forgotten them and that I was sorry. They were all so disappointed! Well, moving on, we had one of the children say the opening prayer and he said that he didn't need any help. You guessed it again. The main thrust of his prayer was that the teacher would not forget to bring the apples next week! But it didn't end there. When it was time for the closing prayer the little girl prayed for the same thing. I have really got to remember next time! These kids in Primary, especially junior Primary are so sweet and innocent and teachable and I learn so much from them each week.

One last story. During singing time Sister Johnson used descriptions of things such as: a child with red hair; a child with brown eyes; a girl wearing boots; a boy with a purple tie. She was tailoring her descriptions to the available children and they loved it. I have seven Sunbeams and so sometimes all of my 3-year-olds don't get picked to help and they don't understand why they don't get a turn. Today one little boy kept waiting for some description to fit him and the longer the game went on the sadder he got. Finally, he said right out loud, "Pick a boy with a ring on his finger." Sister Johnson could see that he needed a turn so she repeated, "I need my helper to be a boy with a ring on his finger." This little boy jumped up from his seat waving the ring and clapping and saying, "It's me! It's me!" as he joined her up front. You'd have thought he'd won the lottery!

We have stake conference next week and I'm singing in the stake choir. It's fun to sing with such a large capable group. Although SaraKay's singles ward isn't in our stake, she has been asked to play the violin obbligato for one of the numbers so that will be sweet to have her attend conference with me and get to perform.

November 17, 2013

Early last week I received an email from Uncle Mark letting me know that he had been sustained as a counselor in the stake presidency. A new stake had been formed and he was so happy to have the opportunity to serve. He will be a wonderful asset with his wealth of experience in various Church callings, especially as a dedicated scouter, young men leader, ordinance worker, and with the refining that his life's experiences have given him. What a wonderful opportunity for him and Rita and Jessica to share! We're proud of you, Mark! As a part of that email, he mentioned the beautiful blessing that Jessica received from the visiting authority. I'm sure it was a very touching and inspirational weekend for them all.

On Tuesday Mike and Marci came for a sweet visit, complete with balloons, happy birthday hats, a delicious cake and birthday wishes. I couldn't help thinking as they walked through the door that they are so full of life and energy, quite a contrast to my normal quiet life. They arrived ready to go to work and the next couple of hours we raked between the bushes, under the apple trees, and gathered all the leaves in a huge tarp and

transported them to the pasture. Before the evening was over, Mike set fire to the pile and we sat on the rail fence with our hose in hand making sure that the fire didn't escape its designated area. Of course, someone asked if I had wieners or marshmallows and I didn't but we did enjoy some hot stew and homemade bread a while later. It was a truly fun way to spend my birthday and all the cards and emails and other remembrances made me feel loved and appreciated.

Thursday night was "family night" at the Nuart Theater and gave all of us family members a chance to see the production "42nd Street" before opening night on Friday. SaraKay said it best when she said that their families would be a very "forgiving" audience. Even though there were a few glitches, it was a fun evening and helped the cast get some of their jitters out.

Friday night Steve, Rachel, Chrissy, and Anne Marie came to the play and Steve took pictures so SaraKay would have some mementos of her experience. The play was well done; there was a lot of enthusiasm and energy that spread to the audience. SaraKay commented that it was fun to perform for such a responsive crowd.

After the play Steve and the girls spent the night and we celebrated with the traditional ice cream/pie/sundae treats as we talked with SaraKay, getting a play-by-play account of the evening's performance. Steve spent Saturday morning helping me get my computer cleaned up and files organized or discarded. He helped me on the manuscript for Larsen Legacy III and also helped me get things backed up in case of problems with my computer. It was so fun to have them here! After a very productive morning they left about noon and hurried home to watch the BYU game. It was sweet to have some time with Rachel who is only about two weeks away from her mission departure on December 4th. She is ready to go and feeling better physically than she has felt for a long time. She'll be a great missionary.

Saturday night I attended the evening session of stake conference. Andrea had been in Twin Falls for a "sister's get-away" and drove the extra two hours to see SaraKay's performance. She later said that Gary and Linda had attended and she had a short visit with them. I really appreciate their support and kindness to SaraKay. Zac Hansen and Peggy and Linnea Hammond were also in attendance. It was so thoughtful of all of them to make a fuss.

Andrea and I stayed up late waiting for SaraKay to get home after the play so we could visit. Andrea is always so supportive and optimistic and really made SaraKay feel good about the play. Andrea spent the night and attended stake conference with us. She came to our stake choir practice and sang with us and SaraKay accompanied one of the numbers with the violin. It was especially sweet to have Andrea singing at my side and to feel of her strong testimony and commitment to righteousness. We had a truly wonderful conference! It was about "Hastening the Work" and was so inspirational. President Jenks mentioned that his presidency has been in for nearly 8 1/2 years and that their time is drawing to a close. Janet told me when we were walking last week that they are trying to get things in order so that when he is released, they can serve a mission. It doesn't seem possible that he has been in that long! He is a wonderful president!

Andrea and I had a quiet lunch with lots of visiting and then she left for home about 2:00. SaraKay got home from her meetings later and Zac arrived and they've been spending some time together. He's leaving for Provo in a few minutes so I'm trying to stay sequestered for the time being and give them their space. The coming week will be busy for SaraKay and I suspect I'll be in the audience for most of her performances. It's been fun to be a part of something in the community again. Sometimes I get so involved with my own life that I don't get out and participate like I should. I spent part of Wednesday in the temple. I love the temple and try to go often. Bonnie Moon gave me some names to do the work for so that prods me on. The more I learn the gospel, the more amazing it is! Love to all.

November 30, 2013

I'm sequestered in the computer room while SaraKay entertains her friends in the living room. They are all going to a late show in Idaho Falls so I suspect that they'll soon be on their way and I can emerge from my hiding place. As long as I'm here I might as well get started on this letter. The past two weeks have been so fun and fulfilling. I mentioned SaraKay's play in the last letter but just let me say that after eight performances, lots of late nights, costume repairs, and lots of kudos for SaraKay, the play came to an end with an almost sell-out crowd. I guess there

were more people to their final performance than have ever attended a single performance in the Nuart Theater since it's renovation nearly 20 years ago. It was especially satisfying to have so many of her friends and community members there.

On Friday Mike and Marci came from Rexburg and I babysat the two youngest while they went with Amber and Ellie to the play. Saturday, they left for home after lunch and I got ready for a dinner I was hosting for one of my visiting teaching sisters who son is leaving on a mission this week. When I visit taught her on Thursday she asked if she could ask a favor. She asked if I would host the dinner for her son whose farewell was Sunday. I was a little taken aback by that request but felt like I could do it so I said yes. So what was going to be a regular weekend turned into a marathon of cleaning the house, cooking, and getting things ready for that. Robyn had purchased all the foods and I provided the house. I got someone to substitute the last 15 minutes of class and I came home early to unlock the doors and start putting things out for the dinner. It made for a big day and I was exhausted from it all.

We spent part of yesterday hanging lights outside. It was a warm and sunny day and between the two of us we manhandled the big ladder in the garage and SaraKay got her exercise going up and down the ladder with each new segment of lights. We tested all the lights before we hung them and were so proud of ourselves for figuring out the little gizmos that clamped them to the rain gutters. When we finally finished and turned them on, it was disheartening to see that in three separate places the lights were out. It was a puzzle since it was just a few on each different strand so we couldn't figure out why the whole set wasn't out. We were too tired to mess with it so we just put the ladder away and decided to deal with it another day.

Later we cleaned the garage, swept off the last of the leaves from the patio, stored away the lawn furniture in the shed, moved the snow blower into the garage, and put the last box of apples downstairs. It was a big project but it felt good to know that we're cleaned and winterized and ready for whatever weather comes our way. Actually, we are rather nervous about winter settling in with SaraKay traveling back and forth each day for school but I guess it can't be avoided.

Today we put up most of the Christmas decorations inside and listened to Christmas CD's while we decorated the tree. It made for a fun morning albeit a little nostalgic. Something about the holidays evokes sweet memories and today we were laughing and crying about Christmas's past and Daddy. It doesn't seem possible that he has been gone for nearly five years.

Earlier this week SaraKay and I drove to Logan to help Steph with Thanksgiving preparations before the big day. She wanted to invite Linda, James, and the girls to join the family for dinner and knew that it would work better if she hosted instead of bringing them here with us. We arrived about 8:30 Tuesday night after a safe and uneventful trip. SaraKay was helping with the Blackfoot Community Dinner Table from 5:00 to 6:00 that evening so we left later than we had hoped to. I usually try to avoid driving after dark but having SaraKay along made it okay. Linds warned us that we should watch for deer so we tried hard to keep a sharp eye out for any critters, especially in the area between Preston and Downata where there are a lot of hills and a minimum of houses.

It was so fun to spend some time with the Bennions. Sam brought a girlfriend home for the weekend so we enjoyed getting acquainted with her. We took Linda and Frankie shopping Wednesday for a few hours and then waited while Linda met with an attorney who is representing her at a hearing regarding her health insurance. It was close to noon before we dropped Linda off and took Lin and Frankie home with us to help with preparations for the next day. Steph and Katie had spent a lot of time cooking and preparing before we got there so on Wednesday, we pretty much just put the finishing touches on. Sam, Josh, Kate Bennion, Katie (Sam's friend), and SaraKay went to a movie and shopping. Later we all had a pizza party. When Katie and SaraKay left to take Lin and Frankie home they got a flat tire so Linds and Josh went to their rescue. I was grateful that I had a full-sized tire in the trunk and that the flat hadn't happened enroute from Blackfoot the night before. A couple of hours later Mike and Marci and four arrived. They had visited Steve and Bonnie and seen their new home and had supper with them. After some fun visiting, we put the kids down for the night and we all watched "Pacific Rim" on their big screen TV. Although I usually don't enjoy Sci-Fi I really enjoyed the show and it was fun to watch it with the Bennions who always have plenty of fun comments.

Thursday morning we continued our preparations while most of the family went to a nearby park to play Frisbee. Later Marci took the kids and went

to the same park and let the kids enjoy the playground equipment. Tim arrived about noon and we visited for about an hour before the rest of the bunch arrived from the park. We planned to eat about one but Linda was cooking her share of the meal and didn't arrive until two. It was easy to see why she was late. She had prepared a huge pan of mac and cheese, another huge pan of green beans with bacon and small potatoes, four sweet potato pies, and she had fried up enough fish for everyone to have a big fillet. She had really outdone herself! She also brought several bags of greens and the stuff for a potato salad but we talked her out of finishing them because we had so much food already. Linda gave a beautiful prayer and we enjoyed a wonderful meal fit for a king!

The rest of the afternoon was spent visiting and playing pool while Mike and Marci's kids watched a movie. SaraKay and I left for home about 7:30. Enroute home we hit two raccoons who were ambling across the road in the dark. SaraKay was driving and swerved slightly to avoid them but it wasn't possible. We were both so sad about it but there wasn't anything to do. When we got home, we saw that the impact had knocked out one of the front bumper lights and cracked the front bumper. I kept thinking how fortunate we were that we hadn't hit a deer or we would have had serious damage.

I'm tired tonight and the kids just left for the movie so I think I'll go to bed. I love each of you and miss having you closer for the holidays. I hope that your homes are filled with happiness and warmth. Know that I'm so grateful for each of you and I pray for you each day. Love, Mom

December 8, 2013

It's a winter wonderland outside today, complete with lots of snow, flocked trees, and low temperatures. It snowed most of yesterday and SaraKay had several places she needed to be so I tagged along. It was rather magical with the soft snowfall and people bustling about. One of the things we did was to attend a children's choir concert that featured children of all ages, dressed in red, white and black and performing lots of upbeat songs. It was so fun and gave me the Christmas spirit! When we arrived home from our outing, someone had shoveled off the cement pad in front of the garage and our front walk. We so appreciated that. SaraKay got up early this morning and shoveled it off again as well as clearing some of our driveway so that we could get out for our meetings. I really appreciated her help. I stood watching her out the window, cheering her on, since I didn't dare get out in the cold. My voice has been struggling again and I couldn't risk losing it before I finished my speaking assignment.

I spoke today in Church about my trip to Israel. I worked on my talk all week, especially since I didn't want it to be a travelogue but something that would inform and inspire. I had lots of good comments on it but my favorite moment was when I looked down in the congregation and saw some of my Primary Sunbeams sitting quietly and listening. We had a lesson in Primary about appreciating those who serve us in Church and the children made thank you cards for the bishopric who I had invited to join us in the class just a few minutes before our class time was over. I had six children there today and they were all excited to make their note and trace their hands on their cards. When the bishopric came in it was a bit chaotic but we got the job done and we gave them each a pecan log as a gift. My precocious little Whipple twin stepped up and as if it was rehearsed, she said, "This is because we are learning to work together and appreciate you!" That was right on cue and it was a wonderful contrast to the one little boy who was crawling under the table and totally unaware of what was happening. I really am going to miss this bunch of kids when they move on in January.

Today when one of them was reciting the Article of Faith in sharing time she said, "We believe in being subject to kings, rulers, magicians. They are trying so hard to make sense of all the information that they're exposed to and its sweet to see them learn the gospel, line upon line.

I received Rachel's first letter from the MTC and two pictures. Tonight, I visited with Steve and suggested that the letter be sent to the Steve Larsen Family group. I know that everyone doesn't have time to read all the family letters but I think it's nice to give the extended family that option. Rachel seems to be doing well and prospering. I love getting Laurel's letters as well. This time of year can be a little hard so be sure to remember them in your prayers.

Tonight, when I did some phoning, I learned that Nate was selected from his graduating class as a Sterling Scholar in the Social Sciences. When I asked him what he did to earn that honor he said that it was a combination of good grades, community service, and involvement in

extracurricular activities. He had a big form to fill out and one of the questions on it was, "What books have you read or are reading that pertain to your field (social sciences)?" He wrote down that he recently completed "Les Misérables" and is presently reading "War and Peace" by Tolstoy. I told him that I thought that was why he was selected. What senior who is going to school and working several hours a week has time to read War and Peace! Good for you, Nate.

Another phone visit I had was with Paul. Beth has taken up playing the cello in the school orchestra and with her piano background she has caught on quickly and is really enjoying it. Her class had their Christmas concert last week and before one song the teacher announced that the cello part was composed by Beth Larsen. When Paul and Jenny asked her about it, she said that the cello part that was a part of the written score was very boring and so she composed a new part and asked the teacher if she could play that instead. The teacher liked the part and agreed to the switch. Kind of fun for Beth. That makes three cellist: Chrissy, Maddie, and now Beth.

This past week I have been working with Linda Atkins via phone calls to help her prepare for her hearing regarding health care assistance. During one phone call I became aware that her oldest daughter, Lynn had a little problem at school. When I asked Stephani about it, she said that she had worked with Lynn to help her solve the problem and also reassured her of their continuing love and concern for her. Sometimes Lynn's mother, Linda, has been very verbally hard on Lynn and Stephani works to counteract that and help her gain some self-esteem in the process. I'm so grateful for Stephani and Linds' continuing efforts to help these girls have a good quality of life. It's hard to know how this will play out but I think that it's amazing that the Bennions have had the Atkin's family superimposed on their lives now for over six months and they continue to love and serve and make the necessary sacrifices to keep this relationship sweet.

Today was Daddy's birthday. He will have been gone for five years on January 30th. He would have been 70 today. SaraKay and I have been a little melancholy this Christmas season. I think it is finally hitting me how much of life is out ahead of me without him. Part of my problem may also be that so many of the things that I'm dealing with on a daily basis are things that he took care of and now I'm grappling with them and would rather not. It seems like winter brings an element of uncertainty with bad weather and road conditions and that kind of weighs on me, too. Anyway, he is missed and remembered. Sometimes when I get blue about him being gone, I remind myself of how grateful I should be that he was a part of our lives for as long as he was. He left me with adequate funds, a warm home, and sweet memories.

On a brighter note. I have been thinking lately about the scripture from John 10:10. “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." That is so true. I think about my life and about all of you kids and all that you are involved with and I just marvel and give thanks for the gospel and the abundant life we have because of our obedience to gospel principles. It's a wonderful thing to be anxiously engaged in a good work and to see the hand of the Lord in our lives. It's a wonderful thing to come to the end of the day, worn out and tired but with a calm assurance that you are doing what the Lord expects and you feel His approval. The Savior and His teachings enable us to find such joy in this life despite the challenges and I'm so grateful for that. May each of you feel of His Spirit and rejoice in his life. Love to all. Mom

December 15, 2013

(Sunday morning) I’ve had a productive week, working through all my "to do" lists, and preparing for the upcoming holidays. We had a wonderful ward party on Tuesday and a great response from the less actives who seemed to enjoy themselves. It continues to amaze me that most of the people Daddy and I worked with all those years ago still receive me with warmth and appreciation. It has been so enjoyable to be here this Christmas. I've really relished the opportunities and associations that the Christmas season provides.

My good friend, Sharon Moss, arrived home from a month-long trip to Arizona where she visited two of her adult children and their families. She walks early mornings with our group five days a week so she is a dear friend. When I called her late Sunday night to welcome her home, she said that her pipes were frozen and she was going to get someone in the ward to help her on Monday. Late Monday afternoon I got a phone call from the Relief Society president asking me if I had heard the rumor that Sharon had gotten married that day. I hadn't but I got on the phone to see if I could reach her. No success until Tuesday morning. Sharon was all atwitter with excitement. She said that she and her friend,

Garen Hale, had gone into Blackfoot for some groceries Monday afternoon and decided to go to the court house and get married. I knew that she was dating Garen (who we met while serving as missionaries in the Idaho Falls Family History Library) but she always said that they were just friends and neither of them wanted anything more. Well, I was so delighted for her! She has wanted to remarry ever since Jim died and she is so deserving of a good husband and wonderful marriage. Every time I think about it I smile! I will miss her, though. She has been a "walking buddy" for 10 years or more and at times we've served as each other's therapist so her absence leaves a huge hole in my life.

I spent part of the week baking gingerbread for gingerbread houses. I have invited a less active/part member family for dinner during the holidays and will combine that with an activity to decorate the houses. I've never done it before but it has been a big job! (I'll probably never do it again). I needed more than one pair of hands in order to cut the baked dough before it got rock hard. I tried all different methods and am not convinced yet that it's going to work but we'll give it a try. One thing is certain: no one will be tempted to eat the house. The bread is rock solid and more like a cracker than bread. Becky gave me some good ideas about putting the pieces together so hopefully I can make it work.

Wednesday evening SaraKay's single adult group went Christmas caroling and they came here to sing to me. What fun! It's kind of a motley bunch of kids but they are all very sweet and I was surprised and honored with their visit. SaraKay's dating has tapered off. She has started ending some of the relationships that she knows aren't going anywhere. She feels like these boys will be better off putting their energies towards other girls. Several of them are leaving for school come January. She has a couple of missionaries that are returning this month from her MTC and mission that she has kept in touch with. Hopefully she will have a chance to date a couple of them. She has managed to keep busy with the social scene around here. She is scheduled to take her GRE for graduate school on December 21st so a lot of her spare time has been spent boning up for that.

Yesterday we spent several hours making pecan logs to give to all the teachers, administrators, and staff at her place of work. It was fun to work together on that project. She also dipped pretzels in almond bark and decorated the bags for Christmas giving. It's interesting what I missed last year while on my mission. I really missed the cooking and when I go on my next mission, I am going to take two additional items: a phone book and copies of my favorite recipes. I tried pulling recipes from the internet but they weren't as good as my personal favorites back home.

This afternoon I am hosting the homecoming dinner for a young man from our ward who is the brother of Qelvin Kirkham who had his farewell dinner here two weeks ago. I offered to host both since Robyn, their mother, has recently had both knees operated on and is still struggling to get around. I've spent a good share of the week sprucing up the house and preparing for the dinner although I've wanted to do some thorough cleaning before my company starts arriving for Christmas so it was time well spent. Robyn brought over most of the food and supplies last night so I think that we're ready.

I made a huge potato salad yesterday for the dinner and about supper time SaraKay remembered that she was supposed to provide a salad for a "linger longer" in the singles ward today. Fortunately, there was enough potato salad for us both and we were glad we didn't have to prepare another salad late last night. Today is her Christmas musical program in their sacrament meeting so I'm leaving Primary early and going to slip in and enjoy her choir numbers and presentation. Ours is next Sunday and it will be fun for me to have David and three and SaraKay with me to enjoy our program.

(Monday afternoon) I survived the homecoming dinner and I think the Kirkham's felt good about how it turned out. Most of the guests were gone by 4:30 and I was able to put the house back together before our stake choir concert last night. Although it has meant long Sundays for SaraKay, she has attended our choir practice each week so we could have her help with the Christmas program this year. Our numbers in choir fluctuate but right now she is one of three sopranos and I am one of three altos. Pretty small women's section and we don't have many more men than women. Janet Jenks requested SaraKay's help so by the time she goes to our choir at 9:45, holds her own choir rehearsal, and then attends her three-hour block of meetings with an occasional "linger longer," she is pretty much "meetinged out" by the time she arrives home at 5:00. Tim described similar hours for his Sundays while he was doing audits for the stake and now with tithing settlement. Last week he had

an 11-hour Sunday marathon! It must be one of the mysteries of the universe how we Mormons can put in those kinds of hours on the "day of rest" and then arise Monday morning rested and ready to go for another week! (Maybe not totally rested!)

Last night at the choir concert President Thalgott mentioned that our stake Christmas concert is one of his favorite holiday traditions. The stake music director this year added refreshments and nativity displays in the cultural hall to the usual musical program. It gave us a chance to mix and mingle and it was delightful. I don't remember what year I was the stake music chairman but I worked under President Monte Bowman and we began having annual Christmas choir concerts.

That first concert at Christmas was interesting. Some of the wards had no choir at all and performed a special number by a small group, but I think most of the wards in our stake now field a pretty good choir. Two of the Riverside wards had huge groups although they pulled in youth and even some children to help out. It was touching to see families singing together. One ward had a small children's group and a flute accompaniment along with their regular choir. Perhaps the most inspirational number was the closing song when the congregation sang together. It was as if the building was hardly big enough to contain the angelic and powerful praises contained in the song. Just being in the middle of that filled me with joy. I realized that SaraKay who was sitting at my side was having a similar experience when the tears began to flow for both of us. Later she commented that she felt that she was experiencing a little bit of heaven as she was enveloped in the beautiful music!

I had a similar experience in sacrament meeting earlier that day. Janet Jenks, Joanne Tominaga, and I were sitting together and the young family behind us was having quite a time keeping kids under control. I had to smile as I heard the father making threats and the kids going back and forth from mom and dad, fighting over toys, and needing drinks and bathroom breaks.

Part way through the meeting we sang a rest hymn, "Away in A Manger" and the young children behind us joined in the singing. They knew the song and they joined in with such gusto that Janet and Joanne and I quit singing just to listen to them. They didn't miss a word and had such sweet, clear voices that it was sublime. I noticed that Janet and Joanne were as touched by it as I was. I love the music of Christmas!

Well, I'm going to spend part of today getting some health insurance lined up for SaraKay. It's a continuing process and an expensive one. The insurance through her job was so pricey that we decided to try Obamacare and see what we could do there. Of course, she can't be covered on mine because mine is through Medicare and doesn't account for dependents. The last insurance we got was temporary for the six months after her missionary insurance expired at the end of her mission and will terminate December 29th. We've got two days before January 1st when Obamacare will click in so it's a bit of a crazy situation. Troy Goodwin is helping me navigate through the web site so hopefully I can get this resolved soon. Where is Daddy when I need him!!!!